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# After the Studio: The Political Influence of Visual Imagery

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After the Studio:  
The Political Influence of Visual Imagery

By

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## ABSTRACT

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Seeking to understand the role of art outside the studio, this paper examines the political effects of visual art in public space. With four artists serving as case studies, the paper interprets these artists' work using the text of a political theorist to understand both how the public absorbs their pieces and what importance this process has. First, using political theorist Hannah Arendt to examine the work of the graffiti artist Banksy, the paper explores the relevance of artist's intention to the public understanding of an image. Moving to socially conscious photographer Aaron Huey paired with author Susan Sontag, the paper addresses the change in public tolerance for images over time, with specific concern to overexposure. The paper then pairs cartoonist and graphic novelist Alison Bechdel with political theorist Davide Panagia to explore the political significance of images as a public, yet nonliterary form of political discourse. Finally, the text of philosopher and theorist Simone de Beauvoir combined with artist Sebastian Errazuriz questions the ethics that motivate art, and what these morals mean for the human condition. Learning from these examples, the author concludes by creating her own poster series intended for the Union Campus.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Only, in the work of art the lack of being returns to the positive. Time is stopped, clear forms and finished meaning rise up. In this return, existence is confirmed and establishes its own justification.” –Simone de Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, page 69*

Though art and politics seem like dichotomous subjects, a surprising area of overlap and number of comparisons exist between the two. Art in the form of writing has been examined and seems most obvious in its connection to political discourse. Visual imagery, though, and how it affects political action can be vastly more obscure. Paintings and politics? Though in reputation, the two might seem quite different, in reality when compared together they pose a fascinating series of connections. Though the artist often works in a private studio, the art they create lives eternally thereafter in a public sphere that carries political implications. But how does art communicate and interact with the public in that space?

We develop our literacy in reading and articulation in reading and writing, but this paper seeks to explore the less acknowledged power of other visual

communications, particularly that of visual art. Our sight constitutes the primary source we use to navigate our world. Our navigation through the world and our confirmation of our experiences all depend on sight. We primarily document our lives using visual methods, such as journal entries and photographs. While we have trained ourselves to execute the well-practiced form of communication of reading and writing, undoubtedly, given its visual nature, art also has power. If it does not follow the traditional narrative of written works though, how does art communicate with people? Are certain kinds of messages or topics more successful than others? How specific and forceful can the intended message be? How relevant is the intention even to the final interpretation the viewer of an artwork arises at? This paper seeks to answer these questions by using political theorists to interpret the work of contemporary artists, bridging the gap within public space between visual artist and political activist.

The first of these pairs consists of political theorist Hannah Arendt and graffiti artist Banksy. Hannah Arendt explores the significance of art as a cultural object in her essays, compiled into the book *Reflections on Literature and Culture*. We design most of our objects with a specific purpose in mind, and when those objects can no longer serve their intended purpose they lose their value. Art transcends this process because, without a specific use, it does not lose value over time. Art lives immortally beyond its creator and because it cannot expire, it does not need to fulfill any objectionable use. Using this idea, the paper begins its examination of Banksy, an anonymous, British graffiti artist. As a form of visual art, his publicly placed stencil images contain all of the significance of the cultural object

proposed by Arendt's text. However, as illegal vandalisms that are usually removed by the police or other government authorities, his work shows a vulnerable, temporary nature which provides an interesting irony considering its status as one of Arendt's cultural objects.

Beyond how they exemplify man's potential, Arendt shows interest in how works of art live in the public sphere, with particular interest to the relationship between spectator, creator and image. A compilation on her lectures on Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, displays her thoughts on this topic. Arendt concludes that the spectator-image relationship bears all the significance, while the creator, and their intention, have negligible political influence once art has entered the public sphere. Banksy embodies the epitome of the relationship Arendt proposes, since he chooses to remain anonymous. The public never knows his intentions, or any information about his life besides the images he creates. Still, despite the lack of personal information on him, spectators still find strong counter-culture political messages in his work. Through his work, Banksy shows the perfect example of imagery communicating with the public.

In the next chapter this paper turns to author Susan Sontag to interpret photographer Aaron Huey. Susan Sontag, in two books spanning twenty-five years, struggles over all aspects of photography and its power. Her first book, On Photography, was released in 1977, and the second of her books examined here, Regarding the Pain of Others, was released in 2003. She writes with particular concern to the shock value of photography, questioning its usefulness, possible reactions to it, and how it changes overtime, arriving at certain points to believe that

overexposure creates apathy in society, while concluding elsewhere that the long term haunting value of photographs benefits the public.

This serves as a useful text when interpreting Aaron Huey, a socially conscious photographer. This paper uses Sontag to examine a photo series Huey released recently on the Lakota, a Native American tribe living on a reservation in South Dakota. Huey, after spending several months living with the Lakota, sought to raise awareness about their plight and naturally, as a photographer, chose to use a series of photographs. Using Sontag's extensive analysis of photography, this paper explores the strengths and weakness in Huey's photographs regarding their ability to articulate the dire situation found among the Lakota people, to inspire others to take action on the matter and how the influence of these two qualities could change overtime.

Following Sontag and Huey, this paper compares political theorist Davide Panagia and graphic novelist/cartoonist, Alison Bechdel. Like Arendt, Davide Panagia discussed Kant and judgment in his book, The Political Life of Sensation, but differs in that he discusses how imagery injects itself into our society and culture, and in turn what that means for our politics. The act of viewing a work of art, when reduced to its simplest form, involves one's eyes. We are trained to use our eyes to read a narrative in a left to right pattern, but Panagia acknowledges the political moment that occurs when art forces us to break away from this habit and, further, societal norms in general. This represents an entire breakdown in traditional thought processes that extrapolates to value us questioning all that we take for granted or consider normal in society.

Alison Bechdel, author of *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, exemplifies these ethopoetic moments, both in her graphic novel and in her untraditional family life. Bechdel, who authors the comic strip, 'Dykes to Watch Out For', used her cartoons combined with traditional narrative to create her graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, a coming of age story that follow Bechdel from childhood to college as she explores her sexuality, discovers her father's, and digests his early death. Bechdel's father maintained a decades long marriage to her mother, but also engaged in extramarital affairs with underage men. He died while she is in college after being hit by a truck, and through out the book she questions whether this occurred accidentally as the report claims, or if her father committed suicide, as she suspects. While writing about these topics, Bechdel also explores her own sexuality, which culminates with her discovering in college that she is a lesbian. Not only does her style of book defy the traditional norms of narrative, her sexuality and family life challenge societal norms on both what it means to be a women and what a family model should look like, exemplifying Panagia's theories.

Finally, after Panagia and Bechdel, the paper turns to writer Simone de Beauvoir and artist Sebastian Errazuriz, both of whom use their work to question life in the face of mortality. Beauvoir's book, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, originally inspired this paper, with its assertion that the artist offers one of the most ethical lifestyles man can lead in the face of his own mortality. Beauvoir begins her book by examining mortality, and the challenges man faces living in light of his inevitable death. She continues to explore a series of common responses man executes in response to theses challenges, offering a range that begins with man as denying life,

and ends with man embracing life the ambiguities of life as an artist. She then examines oppression, and how the freedom man finds in the face of mortality applies to all of mankind.

This text serves as the perfect source to examine artist Sebastian Errazuriz with, as he to explores the paradox of life in the face of death and challenges his viewers to question their own lives and choices. Chilean born, London raised, New York based artist Errazuriz works in several mediums, including sculpture and furniture design, but this paper focuses on his public exhibitions. Using murals and installations, Errazuriz explores all different aspects of death, including its inevitability, its unjustness, as in the case of mass executions, and its less known aspects, such as the surprisingly high rates of suicide among soldiers. Beauvoir, examining all the same questions, only in textual form, provides the perfect match with which to analyze Errazuriz's work.



## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTERPRETING BANKSY USING HANNAH ARENDT

#### *Hannah Arendt*

In multiple examples of her writing, Arendt argues how art both serves as the epitome of man's talent and inspires morality within him. In her book, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt describes how objects which transcend mere function determine our culture: "Culture is being threatened when all worldly objects and things, produced by the present or the past, are treated as mere functions for the life process of society, as though they are there only to fulfill some need" (Lectures, 103). In the full passage Arendt distinguishes objects, which relate to culture, from entertainment, which relates to life. An object is more substantial than mere entertainment when it serves a purpose higher than mere function. Whereas a functional object is used only until it is used up or no longer serves a purpose, a cultural object is so important because it has the ability to endure. With this series of comparisons, Arendt emphasizes the importance of art as the work of

mankind to her reader, and establishes why her following arguments on art are relevant and important to society.

Arendt also relates art to politics, describing how the judgment of art gives society an invaluable rehearsal in a skill useful in politics. As she explains, "Those who possess taste, who are discriminating in things beautiful and ugly, good and bad, will be less likely to be caught off their guard in times of political crisis" (Lecutres, 111). Viewing art develops our ability to make good judgments. According to Arendt, when we view art we judge it solely on the final product, the work of art standing distinct from its creator and whatever intentions she might have had for the piece. When judging art we do not worry over how the artist intended us to interpret it, we only look at the outcomes of her actions: the work itself. In this interaction between spectator and art, the newly formed interpretation creates political discourse. In politics, we must judge others based not on how honorable their intentions were, but rather we need look at the final outcome of their actions. In judging behavior we need to look at the how ones actions affect other people, what those actions contribute to the world. This outcome is determined by the status of the person acted upon; his well being, rather than the actor's intention indicates the morality of the action. The thought behind the act bears no weight. Were people appealing to a God or final judgment then it would count, but what good would this do? It does not contribute to treating mankind fairly in the present. We should use the final outcome of our actions, which affects the world, to dictate our judgment.

Arendt wrote in response to the horrors of the holocaust, and uses this context to explain her stress on judgment. In examining how the catastrophe happened, Arendt concludes, "For instance, I am perfectly sure that this whole totalitarian catastrophe would not have happened if people still had believed in God, or in hell rather – that is, if there still were ultimates. There were no ultimates. And you know as well as I do that there were no ultimates which one could with validity appeal to. One couldn't appeal to anybody" (Lectures, 115). In art, no prescribed rules for what makes good art, or right or wrong art, exists. One has to rely on oneself and one's own judgment to determine which images and works of art one finds valuable and best. Similarly, in the text, Arendt describes how this process relates to politics. When judging a work of art, likewise as when making judgments in politics, there are no ultimates rules or foundations to which we can appeal. In politics we cannot rely on God to tell us what the best society will be. Without ultimates, such as God, we need to find new moral pillars, but we cannot find these in each other when we differ so vastly in our values and perspectives on the world. This is reflected in art when we all have different aesthetics but still must judge work. Do we look at color, composition, technical skill, or philosophical content? There is no correct answer on how to judge a work of art, and one must use their own personal guidance, similarly in politics we do not have an ultimate guide and instead must rely on ourselves. Individuals have to have their own strength in judgment so that they can avoid misleading political rhetoric and they have to understand the ethical consequences of their actions. Art can teach them how to achieve this.

But does the artist have any political influence, or is it their work that inspires political discourse? Arendt argues that the creator does not have political significance: “We are talking about the partiality of the actor, who because he is involved, never sees the meaning of the whole” (Lectures, 126). Arendt places all political influence in the spectator of art. The spectator takes art and brings it to life by seeing it in a greater scene than the artist possibly could while creating the work. This fits with the aspect of her writing that was first explored in this chapter, that cultural objects possess the most importance. There, Arendt stresses the importance of the object, distinguished from the creator. Artists have importance in that they create the cultural objects, but the political relationship occurs between object and spectator, not object and creator.

### *Banksy*

British graffiti artist Banksy has become one of the most famous contemporary artists with his satirical stencil images. Traveling the world to tag his pieces in a variety of circumstance and to mass audiences, Banksy works with themes and images that question mainstream culture. Identifying with the vulnerable, oppressed and ignored members of society, Banksy uses public space to spread messages that question societal norms, particularly consumerism and governmental authority, and draw attention to people and issues that the public might normally overlook.

Banksy works in spray paint mostly using stencils in the application of his images, especially, but not always, when tagging walls, streets or inanimate objects

but never when writing on animals, as he has done on several occasions. Most of his works feature a limited color palette; he often works in exclusively black and white, only sometimes adding one color and rarely adding multiple tones to create a more complicated palette. Even when he does add color, it usually appears in the details of a primarily gray scale image. Banksy cites his style, particularly his use of stencil, as convenient, allowing him to create larger images in less time, thereby allowing him to cover more area with his work with less risk of the police catching him vandalizing.

Almost nothing is known about Banksy beyond his work. Banksy, whose real name remains secret, cites the illegal nature of his work as the reason for his anonymity but the mystery surrounding him also heightens his hype and fame. Beyond his graffiti, Banksy has released books on his art and philosophy, and recently directed *Exit through the Gift Shop*, a movie about himself and other graffiti artists that criticizes the art business. While the public remains curious about his identity, and he travels the world spreading his name, ultimately his visual work speaks most loudly to, and is most known by, the public.

### *Public Space*

According to Arendt, residing in a public space is crucial to the achievement of art's full, immortal potential. For art to be held private, and inaccessible to the public, ruins art: "They do not gain recognition if hidden among private possessions, and they have to be protected against private interests. It is only under the protection of the public that they emerge as what they are" (Reflections, 196). Art, as she described before, exemplifies the potential of man, thus it belongs to all men.

To hold it in a private collection, and degrade it to an object exchanged and placed under a monetary value ruins it. This extrapolates on her other points regarding the durability of art, but also leans into her assertion about the connections between art and politics.

Banksy's art revolves around socio-political themes, just as Arendt, through her writing, connects art and politics. Using Arendt one can understand why Banksy communicates to the public so effectively. The key connection for Arendt between art and politics is their use of public space: "Culture and politics are thus dependent on each other, and they have something in common: they are both phenomena of the public world. Even though, as we shall see, this commonality, in the end, outweighs all conflicts and oppositions between the two spheres, what they hold in common concerns only the objects of culture, on the one hand, and acting, political human beings on the other" (Reflections, 197). Art and politics are connected by their common need to exist in the public space. Though individuals might think over, or work on, art or politics on their own in the private sphere, discourse, the meat of the two subjects, does not occur until the public space is realized. By placing his works in the most public of spaces, Banksy gives them maximum political potential.

Further, in her *Lectures on Kant*, Arendt begins to describe the connecting role judgment plays in connecting art with politics. The person critiquing both art and politics uses the same form of judgment. Arendt writes, "The solution of 'the conflict of politics with morality' is derived from Kant's moral philosophy, in which man as a single individual, consulting nothing but his own reason, finds the maxim

that is not self-contradictory, from which he can then derive an Imperative. Publicness is already the criterion of rightness in his moral philosophy” (Lectures, 49). Here Arendt criticizes Kant’s notion that actions are moral when they the actor feels he can impose his actions upon the world and still find them just, because this ignores the collaboration necessary for morality. One cannot decide alone in private what is moral, considering the public aspect of action. Similarly, the artist cannot decide individually what their art means, the spectator, interpreting the work based on how it relates to societal themes in public space, determines the politics of an image.

Banksy, too, understands this necessity for the public space. In *Banksy’s Bristol, Home Sweet Home*, the author quotes Banksy as saying, “If you want to say something, you have to put your message up where people can see it” (Home, 36). Here, in many fewer words, Banksy states his adherence to Arendt’s arguments in favor of the public space. Not only does art belong to the public, it survives best with them. Here, Banksy proves his knowledge that for his art to function it needs the public.

He proves this not just with his words, but also with his artistic style. Banksy turned to stencils in his graffiti work so he could produce a larger quantity of public pieces. This is described by a fellow graffiti artist as follows: “The more people see your work, the better. Political activists have used stencils for years in other countries, and so have the army (to label their ammunition crates and vehicles), so that form was begging to be used - and subverted - by artists” (Home, 63). Here the connection between art and politics is reiterated, but this time so the reader begins

to see the benefits of the stencil. Graffiti artist, working illegally at night, have limited time to construct their pieces. By using stencils, which could be prepared at home, Banksy drastically cut his public work time, allowing himself to create more pieces that could also be bigger in size. This allows for more pieces to be viewed by more of the public, which, as Arendt has shown, gives life to art.

While Banksy's style is no exception, comments made by Banksy show us how graffiti in its entirety adheres to the philosophy proposed by Arendt. Frustrated with media, Banksy describes graffiti as a way of articulating messages more ethically, and with more truth: "Lots of people were realizing that an independent media was the only way to get real social messages across. I think that's one of the great beauties of graffiti: it's public information, unedited and straight from the heart – something that never happens in conventional mass media" (Home, 51). Though traditionally viewed as a vandalizing attack on public space, Banksy argues here that graffiti actually constitutes one of the most ethical uses of public space, an argument made most clear when seen with the text of Hannah Arendt.

### *Communication*

Despite the varying individual responses to Banksy, he repeatedly creates images which communicate successfully to the public. While an image can never be guaranteed to appeal to everyone, Banksy succeeds in making images which large masses of the public willingly interact with. Arendt refers to communicability throughout her work, both in lecturing on Kant, and in her own writing. Banksy too,

uses this concept, as can be seen in his immense popularity. While the location of his work in a public space partly allows mass amounts of people to access its work, his ability to catch and maintain their attention actually prompts them to interact with his work. One of Banksy's most famous images features a high contrast stencil image of a man wearing a dark hooded sweatshirt, backwards baseball hat and scarf over the lower of his face, positioned aggressively with his arm pulled back ready to throw. Instead of a weapon in his hand, however, he has a bouquet of flowers, which Banksy painted in color. Banksy put this image in a public place, on an exterior wall, so many people could see it. Without an understandable image, it does not matter how many people view the piece, it would still be meaningless without their comprehension, but by using the stereotypical image of a rebellious man, which Banksy succeeded in doing given the man's attire and position, contrasted with a bouquet of flowers, which most people associate with love, friendliness and generally positive feelings, Banksy gives a juxtaposition to question. The location opens the opportunity for people to access art, but the content communicated actually makes them think.

While lecturing on Kant, Hannah Arendt refers to the importance of communicability. She cites it as a key part of culture: "The less idiosyncratic one's taste is, the better it can be communicated; communicability is again the touchstone" (Lectures, 73). She continues later in the book to cite communicability as the main aspect which allows an actor to reach the world spectator (Lectures, 123). Since, as she established, spectators come in multiples, always, an actor has to find in himself a way to abandon any of his most peculiar, confusing tendencies, and

instead communicate in a way that the mass of spectators can understand. This does not mean his work has to be less intelligent, but less idiosyncratic works best in the public space.

This process, though necessary, is not always easy. It involves stepping outside of oneself, as Arendt explains in her writing: “Communicability obviously depends on the enlarged mentality; one can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person’s standpoint; otherwise one will never meet him, never speak in such a way that he understands” (Reflections, 74). Banksy himself emphasizes the necessity and benefit of graffiti as a public medium; but the location of his work cannot make his viewers draw conclusions from his work. Similarly to what Arendt describes here, Banksy disassociates himself from his most particular views, instead relying on imagery that will both be widely popular, meaning it will be understandable, and still true to himself and his original message. This process takes talent, and not anyone could achieve it.

Banksy constitutes one of the few, especially in his medium and from the counter-culture he subscribes to, who has managed to reach such large portions of the public. In *Banksy’s Bristol: Home Sweet Home*, one of the interviewees speaks to this: “Grannies, kids, people from outside the UK: everybody ‘gets’ Banksy’s work. But he’s seen as dangerous, because of the illegal nature of his street work and of his anti-establishment message” (Home, 80). This danger, however, does not interfere with Banksy’s message but, rather, makes him more exciting to the public, even if not the authorities. Banksy’s writing takes on a more offensive tone, involving vulgar language. While his images feature recognizable references, in his writing he

can point an insulting finger at specific people more so than he does in his images. Should he choose to continue this angry tone into his art, he probably would not achieve the same popularity. However, by replacing his tone with one of wit, he appeals to larger groups of people.

Another interviewee in *Banksy's Bristol: Home Sweet Home*, cite this to Banksy's successful use of satire. He describes Banksy's talent as follows: "He's great in satire, in a real British tradition. He always sees the satirical side of things" (Home, 29). Though Banksy holds a counter-culture set of beliefs, he communicates them through a mainstream form, allowing for the public to both understand them, and enjoy them. In one of his piece he broke into the cages of zoos and gave the animals signs. His book *Wall and Peace* shows images from this, one photo depicting a monkey holding a sign that reads "I'M A CELEBRITY GET ME OUT OF HERE". Banksy defies the norm of people who enjoy visiting zoos, and instead emphasizes with the animals held in captivity. He successfully mocks the zoos by giving the animals satirical signs, such as the one just described, and communicates these ideas to his viewers in a humorous way they will enjoy understanding.

### *Durability*

According to Arendt, art's power arises from its immortality. While humans subject all other objects they create to use, a basic purpose that ultimately destroys the object, art avoids this deterioration and instead attains permanence. Arendt describes this eloquently, as follows: "Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is

almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualizing their own inherent " (Reflections, 172). Art does not lose its importance over time as its use deteriorates, because it was never created to have a particular use. Arendt uses the example of a chair, which after breaking from being sat in too many times, becomes useless and is discarded, but explains here how art transcends that cycle of deterioration. Art, not made for a specific use or time, belongs eternally to all time.

Arendt continues to describe what this implies for man. The greatness found in art's immortality reflects back upon man, art's creator: "The greatness of man, after all, on which the whole question turns, is taken to consist in the human ability to do things and to speak words that are deserving of immortality – that is, worthy of eternal remembrance- despite the fact that human beings are mortal" (Reflections, 188). Plenty of animals use tools, just as humans create objects for a purpose. But art's immortality, man's ability to create something which will outlive him, serves as a testament to the vastness of man's capabilities, and his impressiveness.

In a seeming contrast, Banksy works as a graffiti artist in a medium rarely permanent. Though some choose to protect his work as he obtains increasingly vast amounts of fame, generally graffiti, an illegal work, lives a temporary life in the shadows of society, in abandoned buildings, edges of moving trains, alleyways, etc. Worse than its shunning from areas visible to greater society, authorities such as the police make a constant effort eliminate graffiti wherever it appears. It would seem,

then, that Banksy's work could not achieve the permanence Arendt claims makes art so important.

While undoubtedly that remains true to a small extent, other aspects of Arendt's argument allow for other types of survival in Banksy's graffiti work. Arendt acknowledges that though art exists in a higher consciousness than other objects, it still relies on them for its creation, and in some cases, durability: "Artistic objectification in general grows out of, and remains beholden to, an already existing world of objects without which the artwork would have no place to exist" (Reflections, 189). Though art endures through time, it does not survive on its own. Even in the early stages of its creation, man uses everyday, perishable tools to create art; humans use all forms of papers, inks and pigments in the process. In some cases, perishable objects aid in the immortality of art. Just as sheet music and c.d.'s ensure the survival of music, photographs carry Banksy's work through time when his original pieces are destroyed. This allows for the preservation of his work and for him to gain the "potential immortality" (Reflections, 189) mentioned by Arendt.

Works on Banksy also regard this phenomenon of his temporary work, and Banksy himself confronts, ironically, how he survives. In "Banksy's Bristol: Home Sweet Home", an interviewee discusses Banksy's disappearances: "On the other hand, although it's a real shame that loads of Banksys have gone, that's what it is: it's street art, it's ephemeral. You wouldn't expect to be able to go to an original Pink Floyd concert anymore, so why should you expect to see an original Banksy? Street art, like music, moves on..." (Home, 85). He addresses that, since Banksy faces such issue with authority and permanence, many of his works, though, clearly not all, do

not receive documentation via photograph and instead disappear. Since Banksy produces images quickly, and in mass quantity, this does not ruin his career, but should still be acknowledged. Banksy himself addresses a further issue when he speaks of where some of his photographs are stored: "It's frustrating when the only people with good photos of your work are the police department" (Wall, 147). Banksy shows here how he faces not only police destroying his pieces, they also hoard the only lasting proof, or documentation, of his art. This prevents the pieces becoming the public good they must be for them to attain Arendt's permanence.

Before it appears that Banksy adheres in such agreement to Arendt's philosophy, one must acknowledge that while they share similarities, Banksy's work also deviates from certain examples of Arendt's immortal art. Arendt emphasizes again the importance of art as an "immortal home for mortal man" (Reflections, 173) in her book when she writes, "The 'doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words' will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed" (Reflections, 178). She refers here specifically, as the reader finds a few sentences after this specific quote, to the typical poem, piece of music or painting, but also historical documents and monuments. However, particularly in regards to the monuments, Banksy has a long history of defacing such sculptures. Not only does he stick traffic cones on the heads of soldiers, recreates mockeries of famous paintings, such as the Mona Lisa with a yellow smiley face covering her actual face, or an impressionist vase of flowers, but in Banksy's version they wilt over the edge of the vase, dead. Thus,

although he shows agreement that his art should have permanence, he also mocks this permanence. One should still note these discrepancies.

### *Spectator*

Arendt's argument that calls for all political agency lying with the spectator of an image, not the creator, gives us original insight to the benefits of Banksy's anonymity. Arendt begins this argument by explaining why spectators are necessary at the most basic level; mainly that art is created to be seen. She discusses this multiple times in her Lectures on Kant, beginning with why the actor would want a spectator: "We tend to forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it" (Lectures, 62), and continuing to state why the actor needs a spectator: "The political actor on his own cannot secure meaning; the actor needs spectator" (Lectures, 145). Without a spectator to confirm actor's labors, not only would the actor be highly embarrassed, the whole situation would be pointless. Just as a speech is only effective if heard, a painting is only effective if seen.

Arendt emphasizes the necessity for the spectator to maintain distance from the work. She states this as a theory: "According, in Kant's aesthetic and political writings, the full prerogative of judgment is granted to the spectator who stands back from the work of art, or stands back from political action, and reflects disinterestedly" (Lectures, 123). This connects again art to politics, and makes clear her point that for the spectator to capitalize on their agency and use judgment, they must have distance from that which they are judging. This distance removes their

biases and clouds of personal bias, and gives them a clear understanding of context. Arendt also gives an example of this process: “Only what touches, affects, one in representation, when one can no longer be affected by immediate presence – when one is uninvolved, like the spectator who was uninvolved in the actual doings of the French Revolution- can be judged to be right or wrong, important or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, or something in between” (Lectures, 67). Just as the artist who sacrifices time from his life to complete a piece cannot stand unbiased and examine his work, in politics too, the spectator needs distance from events to truly be able to judge them.

Banksy serves as a perfect example of this theory in practice. Since he has chosen to remain anonymous, as graffiti is illegal, his spectators benefit from judging his art work without his personal life distracting them. A friend of Banksy's stated this perfectly:

“When Banksy makes statements, it's more potent because it's just the statement that we hear – it doesn't get mixed up in our perception of who he is. Contrast that with, for example, David Hockney fulminating about his right to smoke in public, or, worse, Madonna or David Beckham getting into the Kabbalah. It's difficult to take them seriously, to listen purely to what they have to say on the subject, because you're basically thinking, 'Yeah! Come off it! This is David Hockney or David Beckham talking here!' You can't divorce what they say from what you know about them. Banksy's mystery makes his views somehow more authentic. Part of the appeal is that we don't know who he is, so we can engage with his art without having that dulled by our knowledge of him, or by a celebrity obsession with him” (Home, 68).

Because of Banksy's anonymity, viewers can focus purely on the ideas he makes public, without the distraction of his person. This is crucial, because while his ideas are immortal, his person is not. The greatness of art, according to Arendt, lies in its immortality, not in its creator. By remaining anonymous, then, Banksy forces his viewers attention on the proper place: his work, not his life.

Viewing various reactions to Banksy's work, one sees that this process comes with a series of risks. To start, the viewer has to care about the images produced by the artist, but one cannot guarantee that he or she will. One art critic asked about Banksy gave the following response: "I don't know anything about Banksy, and I don't care tuppence about graffiti or street art" (Home, 88). The man could not have cared less. Another art critic gave Banksy a bit more credit, but ultimately reached the same conclusion: "I think there's some wit in Banksy's work, some cleverness – and a massive bucket of hot steaming hype" (Home, 88). Even without knowing Banksy's person, these responders do not give his ideas much attention. No one has to care, though doubtlessly the artist can hope they will. Still, here one sees a possible interruption spectator's role in the art cycle.

Even if people take interest in art, their curiosity does not have to be a significant one. In another example of a spectator viewing Banksy, one sees a women who liked Banksy, but in a lighthearted, rather than political, way. *Banksy's Bristol: Home Sweet Home* quotes as viewer as saying, "I'd seen Banksy's stuff on walls all over Bristol in the late Nineties and they'd always made me grin" (Home, 47). She admitted to liking the images purely for aesthetic reasons and did not

consider any political or cultural message behind the work. While it speaks well to Banksy that the imagery he produces attracts viewer, ideally they would also look beyond the aesthetics and consider a deeper meaning to the work. As we see here though, that step in the process does not come guaranteed.

Other people do grasp political significance in Banksy's work, but only when they first read his texts, and then view his imagery. In the many reactions to Banksy, another person is quoted as saying, "Until I'd read his books, I'd never realized how prolific, funny and creative his art was" (Home, 90). Banksy's imagery should, and can, speak on its own, without text. But here we see, with variances in types of people, some spectators will react more strongly to the images when they know Banksy's text. They communicate better in the written language, rather than a language of images. This is unavoidable, but far less than ideal.

Thankfully, some spectators do engage fully with the works. In these examples we see the full power of Banksy's work. One viewer speaking about a Banksy mural is quoted in *Banksy's Bristol: Home Sweet Home* as follows: "It's one of my favorite Banksy's – it pretty much sums up most of TV and the media,' says Mark Simmons. "The endless, vacuous chatter, how it sucks you in and drains your spirit. It reminds me of a quote I once heard, that as long as you provide the people with enough well-produced light entertainment as distraction, they won't rebel" (Home, 52). Here Simmons applies Banksy's work to concepts beyond just aesthetics, speaking to politics and culture. The image created by Banksy prompts him to extrapolate and reflect upon his own culture, showing an example of the full potential of a spectator and artwork interaction.

With the spectator interpreting Banksy's work of art in terms of their own experience another set of problems can arise when Banksy, the artist, however anonymous, does not have enough knowledge about their reality. This can happen when Banksy travels to paint his murals, as seen when he put his work on the Segregation Wall. Banksy cites the following interaction he had while in Palestine in his book, *Wall and Peace*: "**Old man** You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful / **Me** Thanks / **Old Man** We don't want it beautiful, we hate this wall, go home" (Wall, 142). Banksy, in painting the wall, as he has described to various news sources, intended to speak for, and in favor of, Palestine. He wanted to use his work to raise awareness about a political conflict. Here we see why his intentions do not matter. Though he attempted to act on behalf of the Palestinians, due to the personal distance he has from them, he painted images that they did not want, or at least that the aforementioned man did not want. Since Banksy was the artist he could not properly place the work in the context of the spectator, and failed to see the meaning his work would take on, as Arendt predicts will happen.

A slightly more humorous example of this occurred within England, showing that discrepancies between artist and spectator can happen on scales smaller than culture. Banksy painted a mural on the side of a building which depicted a naked man holding on to the ledge of a window while he hung outside, hiding from a man searching out the window who stands beside a woman. The scene clearly depicts a woman and her lover nearly caught by her husband. Unintentionally, Banksy painted this on the exterior wall of a sexual health clinic, the owner of which is quoted as saying, "We emailed Banksy to explain how wildly inappropriate the

subject matter was, bearing in mind we are a sexual health clinic. He replied saying he hadn't realized that and thought it was really funny" (Home, 93). This location gives the piece another level of significance that it would have if placed on a more neutral building. Too late though, as Banksy painted the mural on a sexual health clinic, the work obtains added meaning. Banksy did not intend this, but the spectator still considers it. This shows again why the spectator bears such importance when viewing a work of art.

### *Purpose*

In her work Arendt cites different reasons for the importance of art, her main one discussing the worldliness of art, but she also mentions the personal benefits to the artist. Multiple times in her book she refers to Kant's quote: "I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that [what I am doing] can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of mankind" (Lectures, 29). Here she shows through Kant that artists and creators are not engaging in superfluous activity. They believe in their work, and in its benefits to the rest of mankind.

This helps one in understanding Banksy, as he too, seemingly through out his life has wanted to help others. In *Banksy's Bristol: Home Sweet Home* Banksy is described as saying "I always wanted to be a fireman, do something good for the world' and he wanted to 'show that money hasn't crushed the humanity out of everything'" (Home, 31). One might view graffiti as an act of destruction against the

community, but here one sees that Banksy does not function in that manner. He genuinely believes in the good his work serves for humanity.

Arendt further explains, describing how Banksy's images benefit society when they prod people to question the norms in society. "But we saw that the purposeless art objects, as well as the seemingly purposeless variety of nature, have the "purpose" of pleasing men, making them feel at home in the world" (Lectures, 76). For Arendt, this pleasure does not come from a blissful ignorance, but rather a challenging life where one constantly questions and reexamines their world. Banksy, in his juxtaposition of contradicting norms, such as an image he made of a girl hugging a missile, or a rat protesting its rights, creates images that prompt us to question our sense of normal and rethink our daily lives. In this rethinking, art behaves as a political agent.



## CHAPTER 2

### INTERPRETING AARON HUEY USING SUSAN SONTAG

#### *Susan Sontag*

Struggling to discover if and how photographs move us, Susan Sontag, in both her books *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others* explores the visceral, physical and emotional reactions people have to photographs, arriving at varying conclusions through out the two. Though they lack narrative, Sontag still finds different ways that we react strongly to imagery. Originally, she argues that with the existence of imagery, and “the well-known use of photographs in America to awaken conscience” (*On Photography* 62), one cannot live in a blissful ignorance:

Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia. There now exists a vast repository of images

that make it harder to maintain this kind of defectiveness (Regarding, 114).

With their prevalence and frequent appearances in culture, images ensure a level of awareness among the public. With proper placement and design, they become one of our best agents in fighting ignorance and apathy. We rely heavily on vision to navigate through and understand our world; and this familiarity allows us to rapidly absorb information from imagery. Therefore, a properly placed photograph, one set in an area where vast amounts of people are bound to see it, means a mass of people will receive an initial education on the topic the photo addresses. They cannot feign ignorance, nor should they want to.

Sontag continues that not only is imagery a well versed, efficient method of communication for us, but the shock it provides us with originally can translate into a long term reaction. Writes Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, ““Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (Regarding, 89). This argument shows a new take on a subject Sontag wrestles with in both of her books, as she wonders what long term effects, a photograph can have on a viewer. Originally Sontag fears gruesome images risk overexposure and creating apathy, but here, in her later writing, Sontag attempts to show us that not only can photographs quickly portray a motivating concept to us, but that, just as importantly, we will remember the image as it haunts us, and hopefully feel inspired to explore the idea further. While we notice photographs, if we forgot them not long after seeing them, if they did not stay with us, they would be useless. But we do not forget them. Photographs gain long-term value with their ability to live actively in our memories.

While Sontag grapples with understanding how photography interacts with its viewer, she also explores the importance of the photographer, or creator of imagery. Photographs, though they capture images that exactly replicate life, still are influenced by their creator: “But the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace (not a construction made out of disparate photographic traces), cannot be simply a transparency of something that has happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (Regarding, 46). She begins to emphasize here the importance of the photographer, or creator of imagery. This is important for relating her views on photography to the broader category of imagery in general. Through out the book she speaks to the advantages of photography, often citing how precisely it captures an image. Yet, Sontag also ensures she emphasizes the existence of the artist’s hand in photography. The choice of what to depict is just as important as how clearly that depiction is executed.

However, as important as the photographer may be, they can never remain in complete control of their image post publication. They will never be able to determine how their work will be interpreted: “The photographer’s invention does not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it” (Regarding, 39). Since imagery rarely contains its own narrative, viewers relate it to applicable narratives that they find relevant. The photographer can attempt to limit how broad a range of issues their photo will have relevance for, but over time their

image is bound to conjure up thoughts of other issues that have become present as time carried on.

Similarly, just as the photographer cannot limit entirely which issues their photograph will have relevance to, neither can they control how their viewer will choose to act on the emotions the photo evokes. The photographer can create an image that instills anger its viewer, but they cannot control how the viewer will react to that anger: "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge" (Regarding, 13). For all the benefits of imagery, this danger is considerable. Images done well could inspire great humanitarian works to save the suffering, or they could motive greater destruction. Depending how one ranks such destructive actions compared to ignorance, creating such images may or may not be worth the risk.

Sontag carefully declares a benefit of imagery that works in opposition to this risk. While the viewer, after leaving the image, might pose a threat of sorts, Sontag explains how the act of viewing an image has serene benefits: "The standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees us for observation and for elective attention. But this is only to describe the function of the mind itself. There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: 'Nobody can think and hit at the same time'" (Regarding, 118). Hopefully this could counter the potential violence that might erupt after viewing an image. While some criticize the passivity involved in viewing imagery, as addressed by Sontag, viewing imagery can in reality lead to the best kinds of actions. The time spent pondering

over an image eliminates impulsivity in the resulting action, which instead will be well considered.

This does not mean that all risks are covered, however; another risk the photographer faces is creating apathy. While initially photographs haunt and motivate us, overtime we risk becoming overexposed and numb to these images, and therefore political issues. In *On Photography*, written in 1977, Sontag thought that apathy undoubtedly grew over time, but twenty-five years later, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, rethinks her previous position: "As much as they create sympathy, I wrote, photographs shrivel sympathy. Is this true? ...I'm not so sure now" (Regarding, 105). She explains her doubts earlier in the book: "As one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images. Yet there are cases where repeated exposure to what shocks, saddens, appalls does not use up a full-hearted response" (Regarding, 82). Sontag explains while photography can evoke emotions and conquer ignorance, the photographer cannot take this for granted. This elaborates on her previous stress on the importance of the artist's hand in the work. Another reason the photographer has to use discretion in framing their work is to keep alive and not expire the photographs shock value and ability to evoke emotion.

### *Aaron Huey*

As a photographer, Aaron Huey has spent several years visiting and living with the Lakota people on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Through the series of photographs he released that depicts what he saw during his time there, he aims to

raise awareness about Pine Ridge, or as refers to it, “ground zero for Native issues in the U.S.” (TED). The American conscious needs a greater awareness about the overlooked Lakota people, and Huey intends to provide us with that. He presented his photographs during a TEDtalk, where he also gave a twenty minute lecture on the history of the Lakota people, his relationship with them, and how we can forward from the present situation.

His relationship with the Lakota people is a personal one. As he describes in his talk:

They've called me brother and uncle and invited me again and again over five years. But on Pine Ridge, I will always be what is called wasichu, and wasichu is a Lakota word that means non-Indian, but another version of this word means "the one who takes the best meat for himself." And that's what I want to focus on -- the one who takes the best part of the meat. It means greedy. So take a look around this auditorium today. We are at a private school in the American West, sitting in red velvet chairs with money in our pockets. And if we look at our lives, we have indeed taken (TED).

His relationship not only serves to document the Lakota, but also to engage further with them. He spent his initial time with them not photographing, but developing connections with the people. Only after establishing intimate relationships, he began the photographing process.

The Lakota have a striking story for Huey to tell. Part of the Sioux, they live 75 miles southeast of the Black Hills in South Dakota. The land they currently occupy was originally the war camp they were moved to in the early 1880s. As Huey describes in his talk, unemployment among the Lakota varies between 80 and 90 percent. 39 percent of the

homes lack electricity, while 60 percent have problems with black mold; many residents have no home at all. Only 10 percent of people live above the federal poverty line. Life expectancy is around 47s for men. The school drop out rate is 70 percent. The infant mortality rate is 3 times higher than the United States average, and higher than anywhere else in North America. Cervical cancer rates are 5 times higher than the United States average. On top of all of these statistics, alcoholism and domestic violence run rampant in the community and affect parents' abilities to raise their children (TED). This is what Huey set out to document.

### *Captions*

In attempting to articulate the despair of the Lakota people to the American public, Huey uses photographs, but not captions. Sontag mentions captions throughout her writing, referring to them in question of whether or not they can secure a photograph's ethical impact, be it temporary or permanently. Only on one image does Huey provide an optional "info" link, where he describes briefly that the image shown is a chart of drug and alcohol abuse in her family. Does this minimal use of captions add or detract from the moral value of his work? Using Sontag as a reference provides insightful answers to this question.

Sontag provides her readers with an initial opinion on captions in her earlier work, *On Photography*. She writes, "Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning" (On, 108). With this quote one understands that though Huey might have gained initial benefits from captioning, in the more important long term, he loses nothing from

not having them. Further, considering that Sontag describes captions as “overrid[ing] the evidence” provided by photography, it makes Huey even more trustworthy to his views that he chooses to abstain from using captions. Ultimately this shows the overall good resulting from Huey’s lack of captions, in both the short and long terms. One sees he is try to present as unaltered an image as possible. He is not attempting to trick his viewer or exaggerate the information he presents.

Sontag provides further criticism to captions a little later in her same book, *On Photography*. She explains, “But even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached. And the caption glove slips on and off so easily” (On, 109). The point of view of the photographer, expressed in his or her work, should limit the picture already, and captions are not needed to limit it farther. The truest part of a photograph comes from its objectivity, in that it captures what it is aimed at exactly. The caption, added later, carries no guarantee of honesty. Therefore Huey, by titling his series simply, ‘Pine Ridge’, provides the viewer with all necessary information and avoids any unneeded distortion or dishonesty.

Sontag provides another analysis of captions that provides a more complex view of them. In her latter work, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she addresses the following: “It is significant that the powerless are not names in the captions. A portrait that declines to name its subject becomes complicit, if inadvertently, in the cult of celebrity that has fueled an insatiable appetite for the opposite sort of photograph: to grant only the famous their names demotes the rest to representative instances of their occupations, their ethnicities, their plights”

(Regarding, 79). Certainly, Huey had no intention of following this trend and appearing to discriminate, but one cannot deny, after reading Sontag, that Huey inadvertently contributed to this dilemma. Though Huey provided a fantastic set of images with his 'Pine Ridge' series, they cannot avoid criticism completely. This, in the future, may be a more obvious fault, and viewers will see how meaning changes through time.

### *Immediate Obstacles*

The ability of the photographer to initially evoke passion in their viewer constitutes one of the many obstacles that hinder the ability of a photographer to effect public behavior;. Susan Sontag, in her book mentions only one way for photographs to instill a sense of obligation in the viewer: "For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock" (Regarding, 81). That initial pull of the photograph, which captures the viewer's full attention, allows for the viewer to develop a relationship with the image. It captures their initial emotion, and hopefully their mind will follow. This relationship, as it develops, will hopefully carry the viewer to action.

Huey's work carries this shock factor. Some of his images shock through poverty, others through violence, a couple through irony, and several through the evidence of the survival of Native American traditions. The disparity of the living conditions faced by the Lakota people appears in several photos, including an homeless, elderly man shown sleeping in the dirt, several photos of kids playing in garbage, and mostly the general run-down conditions of the homes through out his

series of photos. Another image of a man's face, bruised and beaten disturbs the viewer, while the image of a woman wearing, ironically, a "I SURVIVED CATHOLIC SCHOOL" shirt brings the viewer to laughter. Less amusing are several images of children, one standing among a pile of plastic garbage in the dirt, another sitting in a sink full of dirty dishes while a woman sits obliviously in the next, similarly cluttered room. These images each shock in their own way, making Huey's work immediately memorable.

This shock comes with a risk, and must be handled with precision. As Sontag describes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the desire to shock can backfire on the artist: "Make suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to 'care' more. It also invites them to feel that the suffering and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention" (Regarding, 79). Though photography can stir people to care, this does not guarantee that people will feel empowered. Certainly, the dire conditions of the Lakota people, as shown by Huey, appear to the viewer as so deeply ingrained, and so extensive, that the viewer could easily feel overwhelmed and unable to act. However, since Huey limits his work to a specific site, a people mostly ignored by American society, he achieves something even with this overwhelming feeling. The raised awareness Huey achieves is a feat in its own, and since he speaks of one village of people, not a country full, help seems more achievable. Though the viewer definitely feels shock, they do not have to feel hopeless.

According to Sontag, recent trends in the focus of Americans might allow for them to tolerate any evidence of this overwhelming feeling more than they might

have in the past. As Sontag states in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “The national consensus on American history as a history of progress is a new setting for distressing photographs – one that focuses our attention on wrongs, both here and elsewhere, for which America sees itself as the solution or cure” (Regarding, 88). If it is true that Americans currently feel eager to find wrongs, even with in our country, and Huey has provided them with one. Though the Lakota situation might seem impossible to cure, the American Ambition, according to Sontag, seems ready, now more than ever, to tackle it.

Huey’s ability to inspire people to take action in aid of the Lakota people seems especially strong when we see how other photographers before him have achieved motivating their viewers. Sontag explains this well when she mentions a photographer who aims to change the consciousness of the public, though in different ways than Huey. In *On Photography*, she studies the work of Arbus, a photographer who used those normally viewed as “freaks” as her subject. Sontag describes the effect of Arbus’ work on the viewer: “Her photographs offer an occasion to demonstrate that life’s horror can be faced without squeamishness. The photographer once had to say to herself, Okay, I can accept that; the viewer is invited to make the same declaration” (On, 40). Sontag here shows how Arbus lowered a threshold in the public, and made them look at people they had ignored. Huey does this too, only instead of photographing “freaks”, he uses a similarly overlooked people as his subject: Native Americans. Their situation might make Americans uncomfortable and embarrassed at the injustice we have inflicted on

others, but Huey shows us that just as he can take the time to understand these people, we can too. He lowers our ignorance in a way similar to Arbus.

This example applies to an entire movement of photography. Sontag mentions also that not only does Arbus lower thresholds, but so does a whole trend of artists: "Much of modern art is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible". Using this to interpret Huey does not say that the Native American people are "terrible". However, looking at their lives forces a self-reflection of how "terrible" we have been in the past, and this realization feels as undesirable as it should. Our ignorance and avoidance and the living conditions of the Lakota people, not the people themselves, constitute the "terrible" which Huey exposes his viewers too.

There are still limitations though, even to people who manage to raise consciousness and lower thresholds. Sontag cites these limitations through out her work, including in *On Photography*. "In humanists jargon, the highest vocation of photography is to explain man to man. But photographs do not explain; they acknowledge" (On, 111). Huey's photographs are taken over only a small slice of time; they do not cover the history of the Lakota people. So while he exposes the current situation of the Lakota people, his photographs cannot explain how this situation came to exist. Huey can explain the history in a supplement to his photos, as he did in a TEDtalk where his photos appeared, in hopes that knowing the causes will lead to a solution, but this does not come from the photos themselves. It is one of their limitations.

### *Prolonged Obstacles*

Further difficulty arises for photographers attempting to make an impact with their work when their photographs have to establish a permanent place in the world. Not only will this place feature a constantly changing meaning and relevance in society, as Sontag speaks extensively of throughout her work, but, as she mentions in *On Photography*, this place can be difficult to establish at all: “The public did not see such photographs because there was, ideologically, no space for them” (On, 18). For the public to interact with photography, they have to open themselves up to viewing the work, which does not always happen. Huey navigated through this obstacle well by presenting at a TEDtalk, which nearly guarantees a compassionate audience, who in turn can help to keep spreading his message. Huey also presents his work in a time when American is being most self-reflective and critical, and therefore most open to viewing difficult subjects such as the living conditions of the Lakota.

Still, even with an initial place in the world, how Huey’s photographs will last through time remains unknown. Will they retain their moral value? As Sontag writes in *On Photography*, “The ethical content of photos is fragile” (On, 21); we cannot know. The future circumstances which the photographs will seem relevant too, or even how future generations will look back on the act of photographing people as Huey did, remains unknown. No guarantees exist, then, on whether or not Huey’s photographs will retain the ethical value that they have now.

Further, the ability for photographs to shock, which gives them their initial power over the viewer, grows increasingly elusive over time. Sontag discusses this

extensively in her work, but one sentence in *On Photography* sums up her early views particularly well: “Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel. Unfortunately, the ante keeps getting raised – partly through the very proliferation of such images of horror” (On, 19). Repeated exposure to imagery, according to Sontag when she wrote *On Photography*, raises our tolerance to intense images and reduces our ability to be shocked, but since most of these shocking images come from abroad, Huey is exempt from the theory that applies to them as his work, as it comes from within the United States. While other images of poverty and violence all seem distant to the American viewer and merge together, becoming an indistinguishable mass of far away inconsequential images, Huey’s work, at least geographically, lies close to home. American viewers of his images cannot separate themselves from his images the way they might with most other images.

As Sontag worked through these arguments, arriving at different conclusions on this question in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, one can obtain other insight from her regarding Huey. Whereas Sontag earlier cites the excessive exposure to images as the culprit for our inability to be shocked, she later blames the viewers, not the images, for their lack of reaction: “People don’t become inured to what they are shown – if that’s the right way to describe what happens – because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling” (Regarding, 102). People have to keep themselves open to facing, continually, the problems of the world, and feel empowered enough to resist the weight such images bring. This, unfortunately, often contradicts people’s natural instincts and they may find this difficult to embrace. If Sontag is also correct that currently people are particularly sensitive to

self reflection and righting wrongs, one can hope people do not ignore his images as they might other photographs which are difficult to view.

Sontag refers to the obstacle of emotional burden, one that Huey addresses particularly well. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag writes on the emotional burden evoked by photographs: “It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated” (Regarding, 101). People bore of emotional burdens, ultimately rejecting them, much more often when they cannot act upon them. Why would anyone bear optional, irresolvable guilt? Huey knows that there is not a good answer to that question, and addresses this issue during his TEDtalk. He ends his twenty-minute speech by advising people not to donate money, but to honor old treaties the United States has ignored regarding the Lakota people, and to “give back the Black Hills” (TED). While the Black Hills reside outside the hands of the average citizen and one, therefore, cannot just give them back, giving people one goal to work for, like Huey did, helps avoid the problems Sontag foresaw.

The contraction of photography as both a medium that shows horrific scenes, as explored, and one that people expect, as an art form, to look beautiful, as can hinder the public’s reception to photographs. Sontag explores this in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: “Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don’t have the look that comes from being ‘properly’ lighted and composed, because the photographer either is an amateur or – just as serviceable – has adopted one of several familiar anti-art styles” (Regarding, 27). People, understandably, do not trust staged scenes to show them true horrors, as the point of photography is that it

can capture candid, honest moments. Sontag speaks to this extensively through out her writing, summing it well above. Sontag critiques this public notion, but viewing Huey with that public preference in mind produces interesting results. Huey's work certainly does not contain an anti-art style, nor is he an amateur; his work maintains a beauty, even though he shows poverty and violence. However, instead of this making his captured moments look less authentic, as Sontag feared and questioned, it shows his personal relationship with the Lakota people, making him most trustworthy. We know Huey did not wander carelessly into the reserve to capture his shots. His proximity and intimacy shown in all the images proves his dear connection to the people, and articulates his sympathy to their plight.

Sontag points to another duality of photography, though this time with less skepticism. The photograph is an exact replica of what the photograph has seen, meaning it feels less edited and therefore more trustworthy than a painting, but they also contain the bias of the photographer, who leaves everything else seeable out of their image. Sontag describes this phenomenon in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet, they always had, necessarily, a point of view" (Regarding, 26). Huey seems to use this to his benefit. Before photographing the Lakota he developed a substantial relationship with them, and there for his perspective shows people more of the Lakota lifestyle than they could have found on their own. One wandering onto the reservation would not have seen as much as Huey shows in his photographs, because his intimacy with the Lakota grants him greater access to their life. However, he does not abuse this privilege.

Looking at the photographs, the viewer sees plenty of disarray, but not the 85% unemployment rate that the Lakota people have, not all cases of alcoholism, Huey does not overexpose the homeless people. He could have made his series of photos much more depressing; yet, instead he chose to show several moments of dignity. The photographs show the Lakota engaging in their native rituals, wearing traditional clothing, and he even includes simple, beautiful close ups of faces looking to the sky. The viewer knows, then, that Huey provides a honest sample with his work, and captures the many facets of the Lakota life, not just the images which would shock the viewer most. His intentions are more honest than that.

Despite the numerous obstacles mentioned by Sontag, she also stands firmly by photography as a medium to use in informing the public. At one point, she even claims that images can produce a stronger reaction than statistics. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she claims: "The illustrative function of photographs leaves opinions, prejudices, fantasies, misinformation by Palestinian officials (as the Israelis had said all along) made much less impact than the photographs of the razed center of the refuge camp" (Regarding, 84). This is a twist, and real life example of, the old phrase 'a picture is worth 1000 words'. Certainly, in Huey's case, this might prove true. Undoubtedly the statistics on the horrors of the life quality for the Lakota people have existed for ages. Yet, the statistics become much more meaningful when we see the suffering faces they are associated with. Images of people suffering, even if we do not know exactly their circumstances, often evoke more emotion in us than a set of numbers, despite how horrific they are. The numbers mean less when we do not know whom they affect. Similarly, the people shown by Huey, unarguably,

looked exactly like they do in the photograph at the moment it was captured. Statistics capturing can be trickier, more complicated and less trustworthy. All of these points shown by Sontag make Huey's photographs more powerful.

Sontag develops this point further, claiming that even if photographs do not evoke emotion, they still possess immense value. They can serve as evidence. She describes this idea in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "A photograph is supposed not to evoke, but to show. That is why photographs, unlike handmade images, can count as evidence" (Regarding, 47). Even without the added benefits of Huey's intimate relationships and feelings of compassion he can transfer to his viewers, the act of documentation alone remains crucial. While praising Huey for all the additional great deeds he accomplished with his work, we cannot ignore the benefits of the mere documentation that took place while he visited the reservation. That act, in itself, is great.

What makes that act so praiseworthy is that it reduced an ignorance in the American consciousness. Sontag describes this ability of photography in *On Photography*: "Of course, photography fills in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past: for example, Jacob Tiis's images of New York squalor in the 1880s are sharply instructive to those unaware that urban poverty in the late-nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian" (On, 23). The American consciousness now knows about New York squalor; we do not know enough about Native American squalor. Just as Tiis did in his time, Huey fills in a current blank he found in the American consciousness.

### *Value of the Artist's Intention*

These obstacles and limitations do not make the work of the photographer without honor. The first of these honors is the inclination. Sontag refers to it in *On Photography*: "Still, there is a large difference between the activity of the photographer, which is always willed, and the activity of the writer, which may not be. One has the right to, may feel compelled to, give voice to one's own pain – which is, in any case, one's own property. One volunteers to seek out the pain of others" (On, 39-40). The photographer never absentmindedly captures the suffering of others. A good intention always exists behind their work. No matter the outcomes of his work, the act Huey undertook to go move in with the Lakota people, develop personal relationships with them, and take the efforts to photograph them in hopes of making any dent he could in the public's ignorance, is an honorable one. Sontag acknowledges this to make sure the life of photographs do not override the life of the artist, which is also considerable.

Even beyond this intention, another level of honor seems almost guaranteed. Sontag acknowledges in *Regarding the Pain of Others* the benefit of consciousness raising, no matter the actions that follow it: "To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames. Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others" (Regarding, 114). Though acknowledging the hell Sontag refers to might not lead to its elimination, the awareness might have other benefits. Enlarging our sense of suffering will help us prevent suffering in the future. Time

will tell if seeing Huey's photographs prompt the alleviation of their dire conditions; but the self-reflection encouraged by his images certainly will affect us ever creating such situations again in the future. While this certainly achieves something less than ideal, it deserves some praise.

These examples of honor are justified by a higher call made to photographers. Sontag mentions a moral obligation faced by photographers to show the world what they can see, regardless of how the public acts with this knowledge: "In the name of realism, one was permitted – required – to show unpleasant, hard facts" (Regarding, 52). This quote appears in *Regarding the Pain of Others* in a section where Sontag cites the camera as crucial to memory or history. Photographers, thus, have an obligation to document history so it can be reviewed in the future. They do not know how future generations will react to the photographs, or what context people will place them in, however, the obligation to create remains. In this sense, Huey, serves a strong purpose just by documenting the situation of the Lakota people for the world to have. His work helps to ensure that they will not be forgotten, that the world cannot overlook what they have done.

This remains true, regardless of how many viewers see the work. Sontag writes on this in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel, does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by images" (Regarding, 116). The artist's responsibility lies in creating their work. Whether or not the viewer chooses to open their eyes to it lies mostly out of the artist's control. Though they can tailor their images to appeal to viewers, or place their images in strategic locations, ultimately their

responsibility lies in creating the work, not controlling their viewers. This means for Huey that he has far exceeded any obligation of typical photographers. He has promoted his work with a twenty-minute talk on the history of the Lakota people through the vastly popular site, TED.com, ensuring thousands of people will see his work and know the history and meaning behind it.



### CHAPTER 3:

#### INTERPRETING ALISON BECHDEL USING DAVIDE PANAGIA

##### *Davide Panagia*

In his book, *The Political Life of Sensation*, Davide Panagia draws for his reader connections between art and politics, describing how they both relate to what he terms “ethopoetic moments”. For Panagia, ethopoetic moments occur when we transcend our previously conceived notions of category and connect or form relationships between ideas or items we previously thought of as disconnected. When these connections happen, a political act occurs; experiencing art, and seeing something unexpected in an aesthetic arrangement, creates these moments. Thus, Panagia describes a connection between art and politics. His articulation of this process occurs at the start of his book, framing the interpretation of the aesthetic moments he investigates.

In addition to these more complex ideas, Panagia also explains to his reader how basic our reliance on art can be. “Without the assurance that our eyes grant us

sight and our skin offers us touch, we can no longer assume that we know how to read and write, how to tell a story” (Panagia, 109). We rely on our sense to prove our existence, and of those senses we use our vision most prominently. This reliance on vision means that imagery forms one of most basic and persistent forms of communication. This is true in reading and watching the delivery of speeches, but also less traditional forms of imagery, types that Panagia explores throughout his book.

He begins with explaining the political side to the relationship and how they relate to ethopoetic moments. He writes, “Politics happens when a relation of attachment or detachment is formed between heterological elements... [When] interruption of previous forms of relating occurs” (Panagia, 3). This describes the functioning of the political moment, a new way of seeing things that jolts us out of the status quo and helps us to see things that we could not previously.

He continues to describe the ethics behind this ethopoetic process. “[Moments of breakdown] are for these reasons ethical moments... They compel us to relinquish our attachments and acknowledge that our subjectives are inconsistent and open to repetitions of articulation” (Panagia, 4). For Panagia, the essence of politics lies in this questioning and growth of self, both of the individual, and of society. The passivity involved in accepting segregated, categorized activities, items and ideas do not constitute politics. Rather, it’s created in actively connecting and forming relationships between previously unrelated elements.

In the book Panagia cites an Italian chocolatier’s protest as an example of an ethopoetic moment. By taking chocolate making, usually an activity in cooking, and

bringing it into the public space to create a protest, the chocolatiers give birth to an ethopoetic moment. As Panagia describes: “In this case, however, the public preparation of chocolate was meant as a protest against new standards instituted by the European Chocolate Directive on March 15, 2000” (Panagia, 46). The Directive wanted to change the standards on vegetable fat levels in chocolate, allowing for more animal fat to be used in replacement of cocoa butter. Not only did this offend the chocolatiers who prided themselves on their fine chocolate that they could make available for the masses, but also it would affect global economy, decreasing greatly the demand for cocoa supplied from Africa. In protest, they brought their chocolate making to the public squares, making their issue visible. This epitomizes Panagia’s point about art connecting distinct elements, with their performance connecting the taste of chocolate to the world economy.

Art enters this equation because of both its ability to introduce us to new connections between elements, as seen by the Italian chocolate makers, and for its ability to develop our judgment. Panagia explains: “Aesthetic theory and criticism are central to our appreciation of such ethopoetic moments, especially as they relate to questions of judgment: how can we give value to an object when we lack confidence in our banisters of judgment?” (Panagia, 4). Art and aesthetics occupy a rare category of judgment where our personal, individual opinions affect our judgment much more so than they normally would. Whereas one can solve a math problem and arrive at a universally correct answer, no such absolutes exist in art. Instead of relying on previously established rules for what is right and wrong in art, one has to turn to his or her own morals and taste to determine what one finds

preferable. To do this, one needs what Panagia terms “banisters of judgment”, which become crucial during politics. With this realization, Panagia completes his connection between art and politics.

Panagia continues to describe the extent to which imagery translates into our political culture, which, in his opinion, is a vast one. Through our his books he sights the importance of imagery in society, first stating, “One of the important contributions that cultural theory had made to contemporary explorations in political thought is to highlight the extent to which political life is fundamentally a perceptual enterprise” (Panagia, 5). He continues later to give a more specific application of this: “The contemporary democratic citizen-subject is a viewing subject and the most pernicious political battles in both Europe and North America are fought at the level of audience ratings and viewership” (Panagia, 99). Both these quotes exemplify how our political culture relies on perception. Our society is highly saturated with imagery, thus the ability to manipulate imagery to one articulate one’s message has become a valuable skill. We see it in politics and politicians, using perception to gain support.

### *Alison Bechdel*

Alison Bechdel’s book *Fun Home* uses graphics to try to get us to see the family anew. Bechdel wrote *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* in 2006. The book, a graphic novel, follows her family life as a child and into her early adulthood, focusing mostly on her relationship with her father, his death, and her sexuality.

Though Bechdel's father maintained a heterosexual marriage to Bechdel's mother, he also engaged in sexual relationships with younger men. Bechdel herself identifies as a lesbian, but only heard of her father's other affairs when she came out to her family. Complicating the story further is the death of Bechdel's father. While Bechdel was attending college, her father died tragically when a truck hit him. Bechdel believes her father jumped in front of the truck purposefully, committing suicide, but will never have any evidence to this confirm this theory.

Bechdel tells her story in a graphic novel, meaning that instead of relying on traditional text, Bechdel comprises the book with series of cartoon strips. The images in her book fit stylistically with her main work, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, a comic strip published online, in newspapers and in book form. The book, in a stylistic separation from her cartoon strip, besides featuring only line drawings, also contains washes of monotone color, mostly in a cool grey shade. Throughout her book she successfully transitions between cross-hatched drawings, to combinations of out line and wash to articulate to her reader jumps in time and perspective. The text also successfully uses literary references to connect to both her father, who worked as an English teacher, and develop both characters and plot. The overall success of the book has been acknowledged by Time Magazine who named it "#1 Book of the Year", and in its status as a finalist for the National Book Critic's Circle Award.

## *The Eye*

The text of Davide Panagia helps explain the political importance of Bechdel's use of a graphic novel instead of a traditional text. Panagia refers through out his book to sensations that most people in their daily lives often overlook, including our relationship with books. As he describes in his book, *The Political Life of Sensation*, the physicality of the book relates to us, not only the language evoked from the pages: "It does not simply contain words that constitute meaning but, as a physical object, interacts with the body in ways that go well beyond the ocular scan" (Panagia, 50). As a reader we bring our habits to our interaction with books. People read differently, arrive from different perspective, and even handle books differently. Our eyes moving across the page has implications we may not realize. Certainly, a reader engaging with Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* experiences all of these too. Her book, as a physical object, contain all the properties that induce the reaction Panagia describes.

Panagia elaborates much on the point of the ocular scan moving across the page, and what this means for a reader. He recognizes that traditionally when reading one faces a pattern of moving his or her eye left to right from the top to bottom of the page, front to back of the book: "What is more, these dynamics also determine our modes of attending to phenomena: in the case of reading and writing, to continue with the example discussed above, our eyes follow the words left to right on a page...: this is a distribution of perception along a surface made up of a geometric composition of lines" (Panagia, 41). Panagia notes the prevalence of this method as the preferred method of sensation. Readers possess a familiarity with,

and understand, this method. However, Panagia also cites its flaws. In limiting a narrative to such a form, and attuning all readers' bodies to this form, the narrative has been chopped and risks becoming limited. Panagia urges his reader to acknowledge other possibilities besides the book, which people have become so accustomed to.

Though *Fun Home* works primarily as a narrative, Bechdel still provides small instances of these possibilities. Though she wrote a book, and it reads front to back, the pages themselves break slightly from the geometric pattern described by Panagia. Rather than featuring the same line of text, evenly spaced moving down and through all the pages of her book, each page of *Fun Home* features a unique layout. Varying sizes and numbers of pictures accompanying her text makes each new page a surprise to her reader. Further, while traditionally the reader looks to move across the page left to right, starting at the top and working to the bottom, in *Fun Home* this does not always occur. Text both above and within a picture might invite the reader to work from the top of the picture, then down into the picture before moving left on the page. Similarly, a column of text moving down the left edge of a picture might be read before addressing the right side of the page, also breaking the traditional pattern. Finally, some pages feature only one giant image, and Bechdel's reader reads only a small block of text before moving around the image of the page in any manner he or she desires. These examples show how Bechdel makes small victories in avoiding the redundancy addressed by Panagia.

Panagia also explores the visual scan movement that occurs when one views a work of art. He views this action in comparison to the more rehearsed motion of

reading: “Another way of saying this is that these thinkers draw a perceptual distinction between reading as an ocular and muscular operation of the eye that scans the page from left to right, generating a sense of narrative progress and pictorial seeing, where the muscles of the eye cannot rely on the habit of ‘reading movement’ in order to appreciate the success of an image” (Panagia, 100). Our eye does not read, in the typical left to right, top to bottom fashion, a painting. It works differently based on the composition of the painting. Panagia points this out, and then continues after the passage to provide case studies on his point, emphasizing the power of imagery to describe a narrative. These examples do not apply particularly well to the individual images in Bechdel’s work, but the idea of the ocular scan still relates. Not only does Panagia criticize the idea that traditional reading is the only ocular scan, he offers other ideas. Bechdel’s use of imagery helps support this notion.

### *Visual Art*

While Panagia’s work offers plentiful insight to the importance of visual artists, he seems most interested in artistic mavericks; those who have created innovated an original style of applying the paint to their canvases. In this sense, when looking only at Bechdel’s cartoon images, it seems Panagia might offer a critical response. Bechdel’s work stands in stark contrast to the work of Cezanne, whom Panagia praises as follows: “By developing a color technique that uses warm colors and blacks to depict the gradual formation of objects on a canvas, Cezanne breaks with impressionism and also breaks with the necessity of using outlines to

draw shapes” (Panagia, 8). Panagia finds himself drawn to Cezanne’s work for its lack of outline. He appreciates that Cezanne’s work breaks typical boundaries by eliminating these edges, outlines in this case, completely. Bechdel’s work certainly does not accomplish this feat. While the viewer can plainly see evidence of Bechdel’s hand in her work, she keeps her style mostly within the constraints of typical cartoons, most of her images relying on strong lines and a soft ink wash to depict scenes and characters. She manages a variety of styles throughout her book using only these elements, some photos featuring stylistic crosshatching, while others appear soft with the use of only the ink wash and a medium-toned line, but mainly her images appear as typical cartoons. While the reader sees evidence of her hand in the images, they do not epitomize her innovation.

Panagia’s reader should note, however, that he does not disapprove of line; nor should one draw that conclusion from the example above. While he appreciates the lack of line in Cezanne’s work, his greater value of Cezanne’s work lies in the creativity behind Cezanne’s style. No one before Cezanne had ever painted as he did. This is seen in Panagia’s praise of artist Kandinsky, whose abstract paintings often feature bold, moving lines. Panagia writes: “The difference between a point and a line is the duration introduced by movement; the dynamic leap of the line made by the moving point infuses temporality into something that would otherwise remain still” (Panagia, 58). Though Panagia praises Cezanne for his lack of line, he also praises Kandinsky for his inspired use of line. By seeing the line as a point traveling through time, Panagia points to his reader the value in Kandinsky’s imagery. Unfortunately, this still does not explain the value in Bechdel’s work. She,

like Kandinsky, uses line, but not in the way which Panagia praises so boldly. Her most innovative use of line consists of the stylistic parting for her outlined cartoons when she uses series of cross hatchings to depict photographs and a soft toned line atop a wash to depict softer images such as aged diary entries. Though they effectively depict scenes to Bechdel's readers in interest maintaining ways, they fail to achieve the visionary status of Kandinsky's lines.

Similarly, the praise Panagia provides for artist Caravaggio's use of color cannot apply to Bechdel. Bechdel never uses color in her work, as she admits when recalling a memory in her book. After drawing an image to accompany a poem she co-wrote with her father, she states: "I never wrote another poem, and soon, I abandoned color too" (Bechdel, 130). This contrasts with Panagia's praise of artist Caravaggio who, in one of his works, depicts the just beheaded Medusa screaming. Panagia's complex response to the painting includes the following: "The contrast between action and force – and, as I am implying, between reading and viewing – is one that insists on the use of color (what Marin calls Caravaggio's 'color-drive') to stupefy and interrupt narrative representation" (Panagia, 102). The painting, in its static lack of action, still depicts events, doing so by the force of its colors and their effect on the viewer. While Bechdel's work contains a slightly teal ink wash, it appears as monotone, thus possessing none of the benefits of color Panagia continuously describes in detail through out that section of his book. While her book serves as an ethopoetic moment, her innovation in combining cartoon with a full narrative does not extend into the images themselves.

## *Narrative*

Panagia begins his criticism of narrative by describing its importance in terms of its most basic values. He cites both obvious, and traditionally unobvious points: "Narratocracy is a prevailing regime of perception in the theoretical analysis of political phenomena. It offers the narrative line which is the story line that determines the trajectory of an action, but is also the stenographic mark that traces a figure (of speech, of thought, of script, etc.) across a blank page... The story line thus incises itself onto a field of vision and begins work of conviction" (Panagia, 12). Here he described how not only does a narrative provide us with a depiction of a story through time, it also entices the basic function of involving a physical reaction without eyes. Certainly, Bechdel meets these basic parameters. Panagia, though he does not favor the narrative, cites its effectiveness. Bechdel avoids adhering perfectly to the narrative via her inclusion of cartoons, but still manages to harness the elements of narrative which are effective.

Panagia also recounts arguments regarding the hierarchy of sensation, and the preferable role writing had taken within those levels. In comparing ideas on this topic presented by Kant and Deleuze, Panagia writes: "The written line is not abstract because writing always has a context; thus, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry famously recounted, once taught the adult skill of writing, children forget how to draw" (Panagia, 37). The abstract forms line can take become subject to superficial hierarchies created to categorize sensational experiences. Yet writing seems to reside at the top of these hierarchies, its meaning clear and unchanging to masses of related people- empires, in Panagia's example. When one has such guaranteed

success of expression with words, they often abandon drawing. Bechdel, however, is not one of these people. Though her drawings lost color with time, they did not lose the line Panagia refers to here. She thus surpasses the minimum conditions he presents in his observation of man's interaction with line, behaving in ways Panagia would praise. With this, one sees the beginning the praise presented when viewing Bechdel's work through the theory of Panagia.

Panagia provides insight on specific types of narration, particularly historical, that compare well to Bechdel. Though Bechdel might not work as a historian in the traditional sense, her work recalls a personal history, and thus relates to the points presented by Panagia. Panagia addresses the historian in his response to Quentin Skinner's arguments, writing: "That being said, the objective of the historian is to make those beliefs available to his or her readers and to give those beliefs a textual reference (or linguistic context) that anchors their indisputable accuracy. That accuracy is further confirmed by a narratocratic procedure that gives coherence to an author's beliefs through the law of noncontradiction that, in turn, establishes consistency between the context of a body of work and its historical emergence" (Panagia, 56). Skinner wrote about the meaning behind a historian's act of writing. The reader must look to why one chooses to write, as this will say as much as their work itself. Historians should not pretend to write for a disputable truth, when their bias prevents them from ever expressing one. Skinner looks instead for authors to have serious utterances, ones that do not contract other statements from the author. However, Panagia questions Skinner's value of serious utterances as he sees them as still a quest for a nonexistent truth.

Bechdel does not pretend to find any of this truth in her book as she explores her father's death. She accepts, as Panagia would want her too, that she does not, and cannot, know a truth about her father's death. While in the book she explores the idea of his passing as a suicide, and her personal belief in this as the course of events affects her actions, she reiterates to her readers multiple times that she does not actually know the circumstances of her father's death. She cites to the reader how the official cause of death was not suicide, how she "suggested that my father killed himself, but it's just as accurate to say he dies gardening" (Bechdel, 89) and that, "the truck driver described my father as jumping backward into the road 'as if he saw a snake.' And who knows. Perhaps he did" (Bechdel, 89). This admittance of ignorance, how Bechdel determinedly avoids presenting false truths around her father's death, even when she has a personal truth, works perfectly with Panagia's value on such behavior. Just as Panagia criticized Skinner's quest for truth, he would praise Bechdel's lack thereof.

Panagia continues in his book to explore other facets of the narrative, including the importance of the moment when we separate ourselves from it. In referring to all the noise that comes with democracy, he praises too the moments when one separates themselves from this exchange: "... [I]nterruption is a condition of responsiveness. The moment when one reader interrupts her reading to ponder what she read, for instance, is as valid as any other moment" (Panagia, 61). Panagia, throughout his book, rejects traditionally hierarchies and distinctions. Here he rejects the notion that our time spent absorbing ideas is less important than the utterance of ideas.

Though Bechdel does not directly ask her reader to stop and step away from her book, her images provide small moments of reflection through out the book. Instead of being dragged through endless words on her life, which the reader is to ponder all together after reading, every few sentences Bechdel offers her viewer a pause in reading and an image to reflect on. Particularly arresting are her crosshatchings of photographs that appear multiple times through out her book. In once instance she recreates a photograph her father had of one of his lovers, while in another instance she depicts similar photographs of her father and herself, presenting them side-by-side. Accompanying these photographs, Bechdel offers her analysis in text, but when her words are punctuated by the larger images, she invites her reader to stop and not only admire the craftsmanship of her images, but also to absorb what she has written. These moments that she provides are exactly the pauses in noise Panagia values.

Towards the end of his book Panagia revisits societies emphasis on the narrative as a way of expression. He writes: "I would suggest that among these affinities of sensibility, these common modes of sensing, is a commitment to narratocracy that is an ennobling force in a culture of conviction so intensely rooted in reading scripture" (Panagia, 122). To accompany this statement, he provides examples of the church with the bible, and other uses of narrative. Here the reader finds his discontent with the narrative's superior status. Though out his text Panagia provides his reader with alternative, but just as valuable, sensations. Redeeming qualities are still found in Bechdel's text when seen through Panagia's theory, even when his theory explores elements beyond the narrative. Since

Bechdel combines narrative with static imagery, her works relate well to Panagia's explanation beyond simple narrative, and into ethopoetic moments.

### *Ethopoetic Moments*

Panagia draws on the idea of ethopoetic moments crucially through out his text. He develops the idea, building it through over the course of his book, but one can see the central concept in the following passage:

I use the term 'political reflection' to describe the thought-activity that accompanies the ethopoetic dimensions of sensation. My use of this term is indebted to Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'reflection obscures what we thought was clear. We believe we know what feeling, seeing, and hearing were, and now these words raise problems,' and further, that reflection 'knows itself as reflection-on-an -unreflective experience, and consequently as a change in structure of our existence' (Panagia, 10).

Ethopoetic moments are political in that they connect seemingly unrelated elements. They break through one's preconceived nodes of traditional category, creating moments of higher experience. Bechdel's book, in combining her political cartoon with a traditional narrative, creates an ethopoetic moment for the reader. Traditionally, political cartoons exist in strips, containing only few images, and sometimes only one. Narratives, as discussed, move in a well-rehearsed manner. The combination of the two establishes a new relationship to each for the reader, thus constituting an ethopoetic moment.

This extrapolates to the larger questioning of societal norms achieved in Bechdel's work. The format of her book challenges the narrative, but the content questions the dominance of heterosexuality in our culture and how we define a traditional family unit. This questions orbit around her father, as both how he led his life and raised her strongly influenced her response to femininity and gender, as well as the discovery of her own sexuality. From a young age she rebelled against traditional femininity, preferring short hair and boys swimsuits, while hating having to wear a dress. She describes how a moment of epiphany happens for her at a truck stop when she sees for the first time a butch woman, one sporting short hair, wearing men's clothes, with more weight on her frame and working in a traditionally male occupation. Her father, perhaps in his own suppressed desire for femininity, discourages these preferences, forcing feminine clothing and style upon her. The gender role reversal seen in their relationship challenges our ideas of gender.

Bechdel extends on this further to question sexuality. She discovers her homosexuality in college and shockingly upon informing her mother of the news, hears that her father also engaged in sexual relations with partners of the same gender. Beyond challenging the notion that everyone should be heterosexual, it questions even that we are attracted to only one gender, with two options, hetero or homosexual. Though Bechdel identifies clearly as a lesbian, the sexuality of her father remains ambiguous. With the multi-decade marriage of her parents, and the fertility of that marriage, contrasted with the extramarital affairs Bechdel's father had with younger males, one could conclude he was a gay man attempting to

conform to societal norms, but occasionally deviating from them. But in describing the extended courtship of her parents, Bechdel opens the possibility of her father have a bi-sexuality, one in between society's idea of two sexualities, hetero and homo, one right and one wrong.

Panagia uses the example of protesting chocolatiers in his book to explain ethopoetic moments. Normally, chocolate manufacturing constitutes a culinary activity, not a political one. However, Panagia explains the difference: "In March 2000, thousands of chocolatiers took to the piazzas of Italy to showcase their chocolate. It was an odd scene because it could easily have been confused with one of many commercial endeavors. In this case, however, the public preparation of chocolate was meant as a protest against new standards instituted by the European Chocolate Directive on March 15, 2000" (Panagia, 45-6). By bringing the production of chocolate into the public space, chocolatiers made their work political. Using a display of their work, rather than a traditional political protest, they made their community informed and involved on issues affecting their work. The political sphere resides in the public one. Similarly, with her book, Bechdel brings not only her counter-culture cartoons to a more mainstream location; she also establishes her personal and family life within the public space too. Normally family life resides in the private sphere, consisting of relationships so intimate that knowledge of their details are reserved only for those involved. Though gossip inevitably occurs, most of what happens in the home is kept private and to the members of the household. Our life in the home is so extensive and intimate; making it public would put us in an uncomfortably vulnerable position. However, Bechdel embraces this. By publishing

the private details of her father's death, the effects on her family following his affairs, the parenting styles of her mother and father, and her sexuality, Bechdel makes all of these political. By placing them in public space, Bechdel asks for people to discuss, question and even criticize them, although hopefully readers will also learn from her story, and challenge their own sense of normal. She certainly makes us question what constitutes private. Just as the chocolatiers made their work political, with her book Bechdel made her life political.

Panagia extrapolates in detail exactly how these ethopoetic moments relate politics. Using examples, including the chocolatiers, he explains the political power of an ethopoetic moment, in a passage worth quoting in full:

In the division between text and reader, between speaker and listener, we find the materiality of the reading and talking experience that has physical objects like the book, the piazza, and the edicola as its source. That is not to say that without such objects, utterances would be silent, nor is it to say that these are the only objects that occasion noise. It is to say, however, that by extending our conceptions of what counts as sources for political interlocution beyond that grammatical and hermeneutic limits of the semantic statement and the deliberative limits of philosophical argument, we discover modalities of political expression that don't simply rely on the need to communicate sense but also to generate noise, like the baking of pre-Directive chocolate (Panagia, 72-3).

Panagia speaks in his book about the "noise" of democratic societies, debating whether certain noises have superiority over others, and how best to use these noises. In the above passage, he explains how political moments like those of the chocolatiers or Bechdel's book provide a new kind of noise to democratic society. It

may not be a typical one, as he says, of philosophical argument or persuasive text, but they constitute political moments nonetheless. In fact, the categories broken when ethopoetic moments occur allow for the noise made by these occurrences to stand even more prominently among the noise of other, more typical, political contributions.

This shows how Bechdel's book so effectively caught the public's attention. Her cartoon strip did not achieve the fame of *Fun Home*, for the book was striking in its original form. So many autobiographies exist that for hers to catch the attention of readers, to make them choose to read her book, she needs something to set it apart from the others, something to make it escape the noise. While some achieve this with personal fame, or a reflection upon a famous incident, Bechdel uses a new form of narrative to make her book striking. More attention for the book means more advertisements and recommendations and the queer theory that occurs within her abnormal style of text reaches a wider audience. Her political message then, that of queer politics, reaches a more massive section of the public, showing the effectiveness of ethopoetic moments.

Another passage from Panagia further clarifies the politics that result from ethopoetic moments. Here he elaborates on the noise of democratic culture and how the public should react to it: "...Democratic cultures are noisy and disorderly things, that the institution and functioning of democratic structures of government differ dramatically from the cacophony of democratic politics and that in order to better grasp the intentions, hopes, and motivations of emerging democratic movements, we need to be attuned not only to what people want but to the regimes

of perception that govern our postures of attention” (Panagia, 46-7). For Panagia, the way we receive political messages, all the sensations entailed in the transfer of the idea, “govern our postures of attention”. For instance, reading a text from a book, left to right on the page, top to bottom of every page, again and again until the end of the book, is a certain way of relating to the information given in the book. He believes as a public we overlook the importance of this interaction, neglecting to consider all the sensations we subject ourselves to in politics, and therefore values new ways of relating to politics, new “postures of attention”. Bechdel provides this with *Fun Home*, therefore increasing her political power.



## CHAPTER 4

### INTERPRETING SEBASTIAN ERRAZURIZ USING SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

#### *Simone de Beauvoir*

Beauvoir begins her praise of art by first defining the artist. In *The Ethic's of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir outlines several different responses man could have in response to freedom of our existence, creating types of man. The artist/writer has the best response to this freedom: "The artist and the writer force themselves to surmount existence in another way. They attempt to realize it as an absolute. What makes their effort genuine is that they do not propose to attain being. They distinguish themselves thereby from an engineer or a manias. It is existence which they are trying to pin down and make eternal"(Beauvoir, 69). Where as her other types of man either remain ignorant to the possibilities of freedom, reject the notion of freedom, view freedom as a burden, or occupy themselves with elements besides

freedom, the artist realizes man's potential and embraces freedom. The artist's existence is the optimal existence for this reason. He embraces and realizes the most ethical living man can achieve.

Beauvoir emphasizes the artist to the extent that the subject of their work carries less importance than the artist's process of creating the art. Regarding the subject of art Beauvoir writes, "It is for the artist and the writer that the problem is raised in a particularly acute and at the same time equivocal manner, for then one seeks to set up the indifference of human situations not in the name of pure contemplation, but of a definite project: the creator projects toward the work of art a subject which he justifies insofar as it is the matter of this work; nay subject may thus be admitted, a massacre as well as a masquerade" (Beauvoir, 77). For Beauvoir, a clash exists when beautiful art depicts horrific subjects. The artist has to maintain awareness that the depicting a gruesome event in a beautiful way might not raise consciousness as the artist wishes. However, even if it does not, Beauvoir recognizes that the main concern of the artist is the process of creating, and the freedom found in doing so. For the artist to define himself by the final product negates the benefits of freedom, and reduces him to one of her other types of man, one who cannot fully embrace freedom.

This is not to say that the final product does not possess value; its worth transcends its creator. Of all objects man creates, art works are the most important: "But actually it is not a question of giving men time and happiness, it is not a question of stopping the movement of life: it is a question of fulfilling it" (Beauvoir, 80). Man invents plenty of objects that serve useful in our everyday life. The

creation of objects, however, is not about functionality, for, as the quote states, it is not about time or happiness. Art, more than any useful object, fulfills our lives. They are the product of Beauvoir's notion of freedom, and therefore the most ethical objects we have. They prove the capacity of humans.

### *Sebastian Errazuriz*

Chilean born, London raised, New York city based artist Sebastian Errazuriz works in several mediums, including painting, sculpture, installation, furniture and fashion design, to create pieces that remind people of their mortality and make them question their everyday lives. Based in New York City, but also working in Chile, Errazuriz has received international acclaim for his work. Usually working in a large scale with a clean aesthetic, Errazuriz's pieces easily catch one's attention.

The location of Errazuriz's work also makes it noticeable. The work of his examined in this paper consists of public installations aimed at raising the public's awareness about a variety of issues. In one piece, Errazuriz paints a mural on the exterior wall of his studio that exposes the number of suicides committed by United States soldiers in 2009 compared to the number who were killed in war. As depicted by his black tally marks against the white wall, the number of suicides more than doubles the number of killings. In another piece he places white crosses in a New York park, each one representing one of the over 1000 people who dies in New York City every week.

In Miami, Errazuriz had a plane fly over the beach, pulling a banner that read "DEATH IS THE ONLY CERTAINTY IN LIFE" to remind people of their mortality. He

also works in Santiago, where he once made an installation that involved a cow transported from a slaughterhouse to a temporary farm on the roof of an central city building to remind people about the conditions of food production. Also in Santiago, Errazuriz made a memorial to the suffering caused in a concentration camp by planting a ten-meter magnolia tree in the center of the soccer field that held all the tortured and murdered political prisoners. One sees in these examples the variety of ways Errazuriz addresses death.

### *In Response to Mortality*

Beauvoir begins her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, by mentioning death. She chooses for her first sentence to be a quote: “‘The continuous work of our life,’ says Montaigne, ‘is to build death’” (Beauvoir, 7). The rest of her work builds from this point, as she examines man’s relationship to life and the possibility of freedom when death looms as inevitable. Similarly, Sebastian Errazuriz cites mortality as one of the main inspirations for his point, and this morbid point stands central in all of his pieces, be they paintings, installations, sculptures, furniture or any other medium. With both of their work finding their birth in mortality, one finds an overlap that provides interesting comparisons and evaluations of their work. The elaborate text of Beauvoir provides insight to the public works of Errazuriz.

Beauvoir notes that potential response to the inevitability to death is to deny it. Man, afraid of the impending doom chooses to ignore the possibility, and attempts to live in bliss: “They have denied death, either by integrating it with life or by promising to man immortality. Or, again they have denied life, considering it as a

veil of illusion beneath which is hidden the truth of nirvana” (Beauvoir, 8). Man faces innumerable difficulty in facing his mortality. As Beauvoir explains, he prefers to either ignore it, or to choose to over emphasize death, and give it too positive a value, therefore denying life. Beauvoir makes clear her critical response to these actions.

Errazuriz, similarly, urges people not to ignore death, nor incorrectly emphasize its role in relation to life. In “Death is the only Certainty in Life”, Errazuriz attached a banner reading just that, “DEATH IS THE ONLY CERTAINTY IN LIFE”, over south beach in Miami. Interestingly, the phrase reflected not necessarily Errazuriz’s top choice, but more the only phrase he submitted that the FCC would allow to fly over the beach, as they rejected both “death is the only certainty” and “we are all going to die”. This reaction from the FCC shows proves the relevance of Beauvoir’s point well. The FCC had to limit Errazuriz in how he spoke about death due to their fears of a mass outbreak among the public. That a banner merely mentioning death inspires this fear shows the improper context much of the public places it in. The exact detail they went into with his wording shows the particular sensitivity of the issue. Though Errazuriz could not control this aspect of the reaction his art would induce, it shows well the relevance of the work to Beauvoir’s theory, with out negating the other points one can find in their overlap.

Beauvoir continues in *Ethics of Ambiguity* to explore the area we exist in before death. Urging her readers to embrace ambiguity, she explores the moral benefits of doing so: “And as a matter of fact, if it is true that men seek in the future a guarantee of their success, a negation of their failures, it is true that they also feel

the need of denying the indefinite flight of time and of holding their present between their hands. Existence must be asserted in the present if one does not want all life to be defined as an escape toward nothingness” (Beauvoir, 125). The notion that the afterlife might be better than the living life, that an eternal paradise exists to forgive us of our sins and make our life worthwhile, or even an infrastructure that offers us redemption later in life distracts us from living in the moment. Though this might be harshest, it is also the most honest. Errazuriz’s work reminds of this ethic. Death, not forgiveness or redemption, is the only certainty in life. Therefore, we must live and be able to justify our actions immediately and without exception. With the certainty of death, we must face life, and make our lives, while they last, moral. By flying the plane over South Beach in Miami, and bringing his message to people rather than waiting for them to seek him out, Errazuriz’s work ensures his message will reach even the most unsuspecting of people, forcing the widest possible audience to hear the message on death. The combination of the mass audience with Beauvoir’s sophisticated argument creates a impressive way of spreading the message of how to live in face of death.

Beauvoir elaborates further on how to live in face of death, by describing how best to face ambiguity. Facing the complexities of freedom and living, one might feel tempted to oversimplify the nature of being; however, this would be less than ideal, as Beauvoir describes: “In order for the return to the positive to be genuine it must involve negativity, it must not conceal the antinomies between means and end, present and future; they must be lived in a permanent tension; one must retreat from neither the outrage of violence nor deny it, or, which amounts to

the same thing, assume it lightly” (Beauvoir, 133). With death as the only certainty in life, everything else remains ambiguous. Absolutes do not exist, nor should we spend our efforts attempting to find them, as this waste would result in oversimplification. However, without addressing in too much detail on the effects of this occurrence, Errazuriz addresses this perfectly. Though he chooses to keep the message of the banner concise, the implications mentioned by Beauvoir show us what more lies behind Errazuriz’s message. As life has only death as a certainty, must be lived in the moment, without absolutes. This means we must embrace ambiguity, and learn to be our own judges of morals, which out appealing to others or expecting a later redemption.

Embracing this ambiguity, for Beauvoir, means to obtain freedom. This freedom applies not only to the individuals, but by embracing freedom themselves they open up the opportunity for others to also find freedom. As she writes: “To will oneself free is also to will others free” (Beauvoir, 73). Believing in ambiguity, and not appealing to absolutes, effects how one relates to others and one’s actions in society. Quite simply, our actions affect others. Errazuriz, in a different work of his, also embraced this notion. In “Tired of Life”, Errazuriz obtained use of one of the giant screens displayed above a busy street in New York City. On this screen he ran a video of himself yawning slowly and repeatedly. The idea behind the piece hoped that this yawn would have contagious properties and force other people in the square to yawn, and from their yawn feel compelled to reexamine their life and how they live it. Questioning city life and the philosophy behind how dwellers scurry around hastily during the day, and what level of individual consciousness

inspires this action. Are these people living ethically? A person living with acceptance of ambiguity, as Beauvoir prescribes, would not yawn as they moved through life, for the lifestyle Beauvoir encourages one to lead in the face of death requires the challenge of constant questioning. And just as a life of freedom wills others free, the unfree life oppresses others. We see this as Errazuriz spreads his bored yawn through out the New York square. By displaying this normally subtle action upon a giant, illuminated television, Errazuriz forces New York residents to rethink the yawn they might have normally overlooked, and question their entire lifestyle.

Beauvoir would not find herself surprised, however, that some people might be prone to yawning, or facing problems with their lifestyle. She acknowledges the difficulty in accepting the ambiguity in facing death: "Each one has the incomparable taste in his mouth of his own life, and yet each feels himself more insignificant than an insect within the immense collectivity whose limits are one with the earth's" (Beauvoir, 9). One's awareness of self, juxtaposed with the gravity of man's mortality, and all of life which exists with out him might seem overwhelming, and as previously mentioned could commonly encourage him to attempt to live in oblivion to his situation and the benefits of ambiguity. Thus one arrives at the yawning. Ignoring ambiguity might lend itself to a less challenging life, an easier life, but this is not ideal. The yawning is symbolic of boredom, a lack of challenge, and though one might not immediately connect Beauvoir's philosophy with the action, one can immediately recognize the yawn as a negative one. Then, connected to Beauvoir's

arguments, we see the benefits of a challenging, ethical life, a life that embraces ambiguity.

### *Rejecting Ambiguity*

Simone de Beauvoir speaks extensively to the notion of freedom in her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, noting in several instances the variety of reactions man can have to the possibility of freedom. While acknowledging the difficulty in embracing our own freedom, she cites the common possibility of rejecting it: “We have already pointed out that certain adults can live in the universe of all serious in all honesty, for example, those who are denied all instruments of escape, those who are enslaved or who are mystified” (Beauvoir, 48). For Beauvoir, the serious man is like a child. He feels his world presented before him without any agency of his own to change it. Others created his world, and he must just accept it. He applies himself strongly, but without questioning that which he applies himself to and without creating anything new. Errazuriz calls upon his viewers to question this in another installation piece of his, “The Cow”. In this piece, Errazuriz takes a cow he rescued from a slaughterhouse and moves it to an impromptu farm he created atop a building in Santiago. He strategically picked the rooftop because it placed the cow in view of major economic, political, and religious buildings in the city. In doing so he forces people to rethink their meat consumption and animal treatment. He forces them away from acting as a serious man in the location he selected for the cow. By placing the cow before such a range of powerful influences in society, he shows he expects something can be done about the conditions of slaughterhouses. Man does

not have to, nor should he, merely accept the conditions before him. By raising consciousness and agency, he can question and take action against what he sees occurring in the world around him.

Beauvoir describes how those who reject this agency might feel free. However, she also explains how they are not: "If a door refuses to open, let us accept not opening it and there we are free. But by doing that, one manages only to save an abstract notion of freedom. It is emptied of all content and all truth" (Beauvoir, 29). By moving past, and not remaining caught in time, among a lost opportunity, one might feel free. Indeed, they live independently of obstacles. Yet, this is not the freedom Beauvoir speaks to. True freedom should not be easy and carefree, but difficult. Errazuriz's cow exemplifies this. Just as one might rather forget and move past a closed door, they might want to forget about the horrors of the meat industry, not interfere, and move on to something else in life. However, this oppression of animals and lack of individual agency does not promote freedom. By bringing the cow into a public space, and ensuring people do not deny the existence of the cow, he forms a metaphor for all difficulties and ambiguities in life one might rather not confront. By forcing this confrontation he creates a more ethical, though difficult way for one to think about situations and opportunities that surround oneself.

Beauvoir again emphasizes the difficulty in choosing ambiguity, when instead one could choose not to be free, in an early passage from *Ethics of Ambiguity*. Here, she writes the following: "We have said that it would be contradictory deliberately to will oneself not free. But one can choose not to will himself free. In

laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, impatience, one contests the meaning of the project at the very moment one defines it” (Beauvoir, 25). When one thrust oneself into the world through a project, such as art, one cannot foresee, nor should one pretend to be able to foresee, the outcome of one’s endeavor. The most one can do is enter with honest intentions and continue pushing forward in freedom. Errazuriz embodies this repeatedly in his work. Placing the cow on a public rooftop does not instruct the public how to react, tell the politicians what policy should be passed, inform the economists how they should value to the cow, nor ask the religious figure to give it some sacred value. He simply, and in the moment honestly, raises the consciousness of the public, asking them to question a situation occurring around them. He does not create a false end to justify his actions. His intentions at the beginning of his project constitute it as a moral endeavor.

Similarly, another project of Errazuriz’s, entitled, “An Attempt to Understand a Statistic”, presents information to his viewers without forcing a false end on his work. In this installation, done in a park in New York City, Errazuriz placed 1100 white crosses in rows on the grass, each one representing on the people who dies in New York City every week. Knowing that people may hear this statistic, but that it would not register properly in their minds Errazuriz hoped to raise consciousness with his the crosses instead. He does not specifically aim to lower the number of deaths immediately, nor does he suggest ways to do so. He instead promotes the idea that one should consider this number seriously. He encourages reflection, pondering, and even discussion; just as he did with the cow on the roof.

Beauvoir would agree that man fails to understand the severity of dead men, but she argue this point one step further, stating that even encountering the dead body itself will not move man. She develops this idea, writing, "It is when a man is alive that his death appears to be an outrage, but a corpse has the stupid tranquility of trees and stones: those who have done it say that it is easy to walk on a corpse and still easier to walk over a pile of corpses" (Beauvoir, 101). If Beauvoir anticipates a corpse having negligible effect on an observer, certainly she would question the legitimacy of a wooden cross doing so. In this we find a contradiction between Beauvoir and Errazuriz, though both their works address death. While Errazuriz claims creating each cross made him feel the significance of each person dying, and the taking of time to reflect upon each life succeeded in moving him, Beauvoir would have hesitations about believing this. For her, the live man has the most significance and relates the most to other men, which does not translate in the cross installation.

This disagreement does not detract, however, from the ultimate point of constantly questioning in life. As Beauvoir writes, "But morality resides in the painfulness of infinite questioning" (Beauvoir, 133). She emphasizes here the challenge of the process, citing the pain, but also makes clear how constant questioning, the result of living with ambiguity, makes one most free. As Errazuriz shows in both the cow and cross installations, he agrees. By making public occurrences in city life most dwellers overlook, he encourages people to rethink their choices and question their existence. The cow forced those in power, and all citizens who viewed or heard about it, to question how they get their food, a basic

staple of daily life. The crosses asked people to discuss the cost of living in their city, and offered a way that could use improvement. Not offering answers to these concerns does not detract from the morality of his pieces, because morality lies in encouraging the asking of questions.

### *Oppression*

Rejecting the ability to constantly question one's life and failing to do so harms not only oneself, but also man as a whole. In *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir cites this behavior as oppression: "Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity" (Beauvoir, 83). The former option she addresses refers to living freely, which benefits all of mankind, whereas the latter refers to those in a hierarchy of oppression, which suppresses freedom. For Beauvoir, oppression means to deny man freedom, the worst of which she cites as imprisonment, where man must continue life without any hope of living free. Errazuriz also opposes oppression in his piece, "Memorial of a Concentration Camp". For this piece, Errazuriz places a 10 meter high magnolia tree in the center of a soccer field, whose surrounding stadium was used by previous dictator Augusto Pinochet to house 1000s of those in his political opposition while he tortured and murdered them for several months. Errazuriz ended his weeklong installation with a soccer match on the field where he planted the tree, held in front of 20,000 spectators. By asking viewers to come and

remember the incident, Errazuriz creates a release of the oppression, and takes his part in injecting a sense of Beauvoir's ethical freedom into the situation.

Errazuriz succeeds in promoting freedom through his tact in addressing the horrific history of the former concentration camp. He complies with Beauvoir's notion that in opposing oppression one cannot have unachievable ends in mind: "But that simply means that man must accept the tension of the struggle, that his liberation must actively seek to perpetuate itself, without aiming at an impossible state of equilibrium and rest; this does not mean that he ought to prefer the sleep of slavery to this incessant conquest" (Beauvoir, 96). Just as man cannot ignore the difficulties of ambiguity, nor attempt to find an absolute beyond them, man must face a realistic approach when facing oppression. He cannot seek an idealistic, yet unrealistic world, where no oppression exists, for this would constitute denial. Nor can he degrade himself to the not free level of oppression, and in attempts to eradicate oppression become an oppressor himself. Errazuriz shows how to handle the situation, though notable his challenge in doing so was not as great given the decades that have passed since the occurrence of the concentration camp in 1973. Still, inviting people to come, remember, reflect, and discuss the past occurrences offers a moral response of action to what occurred. He does not aim for an absolute end in eradicating, or curing, the situation, but promotes us to rethink and question what happened. This lack of end fits with Beauvoir's ethics.

Beauvoir makes a certain distinction, though, about when interfering with oppression is appropriate. She does not believe anyone can interfere with any oppression they find, as she explains in *Ethics of Ambiguity*: "Indeed, there is nothing

more arbitrary than intervening as a stranger in a destiny which is not ours: one of the shocking things about charity – in the civic sense of the word – is that it is practiced from the outside, according to the caprice of the one who distributes it and who is detached from the object” (Beauvoir, 86). One cannot successfully liberate any oppressed other person, because in doing so they would inevitably, in their ignorance of the situation, impose instead their own biases and preferences upon the situation, thereby becoming an oppressor themselves. Errazuriz avoids this both in his subtlety, and his relation to the incident. In pointing his viewers merely to observe upon the situation, and not calling for any specific actions, Errazuriz clearly avoids any form of oppression. Further, despite the horrors taking place a few years before Errazuriz was born, since the incident took place in his some city of Santiago, Chile, he has enough of a personal relationship to the event that his calling attention to it does not equate with a stranger doing the same. With his familiar relationship to the community, he undoubtedly understands their concerns without imposing his own upon them. Beauvoir’s text highlights these considerations of Errazuriz’s, which might have otherwise gone unnoticed to his viewers.

Beauvoir specifies further what she considers appropriate for an outside force seeking to end an observed oppression to do in response. She describes the following limitations: “All that an external action can propose is to put the oppressed in the presence of his freedom: then he will decide positively and freely” (Beauvoir, 87). Since, as Beauvoir points out, many of the oppressed live in ignorance of their oppression, educating them on the presence of freedom actually constitutes the best approach to their liberation. Forcing freedom upon them, or

instructing them on how to act, would not make successful attempts at freeing the oppressed. The oppressed have to choose freedom; an outside source cannot choose it for them. Clearly, any of the political prisoners held in Pinochet's concentration camp knew they were oppressed; Errazuriz does not have to educate them on this, nor would he even have the chance given that this occurred in the past. Still, none of this detracts from the tact he used in addressing the situation, even decades later. By merely drawing attention to the history of the soccer stadium, and asking people to reflect, but leaving his own opinion absent, Errazuriz successfully promotes freedom in a place of previous oppression. This, again, is made most obvious to the viewer via the text of Beauvoir.

### *The Artist*

With all of the ethics shown to characterize the artist, Beauvoir displays how the artist, or writer, lives morally and free. She summarizes this well in the second chapter of *Ethics of Ambiguity*: "The artist and the writer force themselves to surmount existence in another way. They attempt to realize it as an absolute. What makes their effort genuine is that they do not propose to attain being. They distinguish themselves thereby from an engineer or a maniac. It is existence which they are trying to pin down and make eternal. The word, the stroke, the very marble indicate the object insofar as it is an absence" (Beauvoir, 69). In her praise for the artist's handling of existence, Beauvoir shows her readers how the product of the artist's endeavors exemplifies the potential of mankind. While all of Errazuriz's

work relates to this notion, one piece serves as a particularly good example. In “American Kills”, Errazuriz painted upon the exterior wall of his studio tally marks representing the number of American soldiers killed in the Iraq war compared to the number who committed suicide for 2009. Shockingly, the total number of suicides more than doubles the number of those killed. After posting this information as a numerical statistic on the internet to little response, Errazuriz decided to transform the information into a public display in hopes garnering more attention for the generally unknown facts. And while man is mortal, as shown by the deaths on the wall, Errazuriz makes a representation of them immortal with each tally mark he strikes on the wall. With this act, he displays the benefits of the artist in action, as described by Beauvoir.

Notably, Errazuriz’s piece does not offer a solution to the problem of suicide among soldiers, but Beauvoir would not see a problem with this. In *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she compares work such as this by an artist to that of a hypothesis proposed by a scientist: “Just as the scientist, in order to know a phenomenon, does not wait for the light of completed knowledge to break upon it; on the contrary, in illuminating the phenomenon, he helps establish the knowledge: in like manner, the man of action, in order to make a decision, will not wait for the perfect knowledge to prove to him the necessity of a certain choice; he must first choose and thus help fashion history” (Beauvoir, 123). Just as the scientist does not need full certainty in his idea before proposing it to the scientific community for them to develop, nor should the artist need an entirely developed understanding of their ideas before presenting them to the public sphere. This actually benefits all men because it

encourages a collaboration of ideas and a collective push into freedom. Errazuriz's "American Kills" shows this perfectly. He does not have the answers for what to do with the information, but by taking the time to project it grandly to the public from his building, he promotes the notion that the suicide rate must not only be acknowledged, but that man should retain the knowledge and perhaps action might eventually be taken. But this action is not Errazuriz's aim, consciousness raising and representation is. In this aim, he lives in ambiguity. He knows not the outcome of his work, yet he still embraces his endeavor. He once sees again, Errazuriz displaying the value of an artist.

Conflict arises, however, when one uses Beauvoir to examine statistics, which relates with significance to Errazuriz's image since he paints not in a traditional manner, but a more mathematical one. While Beauvoir criticizes the statistic, she also sees it carries some merit in today's society: "In our private life as in our collective life there is no other truth than a statistical one. On the other hand, the interests at stake do not allow themselves to be put into an equation; the suffering of one man, that of a million men, are incommensurable with the conquests realized by millions of others, present death is incommensurable with the life to come" (Beauvoir, 148). Here, Beauvoir describes the incompetence of a statistic to represent life. Though the numbers may be true, they cannot accurately represent the meaning of the life that they stand for. Errazuriz would disagree. In his explanation of his piece, he describes how with each stroke of the brush, he felt overwhelmed with the importance of each black line he drew. While Beauvoir offers criticism about the ability of statistics to represent life, and Errazuriz would

agree that offering them in numerical form failed to excite any reaction, he observed better success with a pictorial representation of the numbers. While they might indeed not represent life completely, as Beauvoir suggests, certainly they contain persuasive value beyond merely truth, as Errazuriz would argue.

While Beauvoir might not agree with the power of statistics that Errazuriz felt himself overcome by, she would agree with the moral outcomes of comparing the two quantities of deaths. She struggles with this absurdity in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, speaking on Hegel's assertion that death, being an infinite loss, is equally bad despite the number of dead: "But he forgot that for the one who had the decision to make men are given, nevertheless, as objects that can be counted; it is therefore logical, though this logic implies an outrageous absurdity, to prefer the salvation of the greater number" (Beauvoir, 114). Death, with its significance, poses difficult moral questions. How to live freely with its inevitability comprises Beauvoir's main question through out *Ethics of Ambiguity*, but here she looks to the value of death itself, with particular concern the consequences in value of multiple death. Her conclusions confirm that Errazuriz should expect the truth in his work to concern people. Despite the absurdity, and the infinite loss acquired in a death, the number of suicides, being over twice that the number of killings, should seem worse to the public viewing the piece. While all death carries a negative connotation, the suicides being worse than actual killings in war, should strike one as especially unnecessary and wrong. In examining "American Kills" in this way, even though one arrives again at what was presumably their original conclusion upon seeing the

piece, using Beauvoir's text highlights the complexities of the point Errazuriz makes, thereby heightening the sophistication of his work.

## CONCLUSION

Though this paper original sought to find some definite measure of the political impact of art, in reality it concludes instead that subjecting art to such quantitative measures does the medium an injustice. There is no perfect image, an artists cannot guarantee a certain outcome nor measure any levels of success they do have. Attempting to achieve any of the aforementioned reduces art to a commonplace object of use. One can never fully understand the image that lives immortally, for we only witness a short period of its lifespan.

Though this idea seems more vague than this paper originally wanted, and too broad to end with, there are results in that notion. In its abstract, not concrete nature, art inspires thought. It may be more difficult as a tool to instruct people what thoughts to think, and might not be as persuasive for a particular idea, but in terms of raising discussion and consciousness its invaluable. Further, regardless of whether or not art can articulate ideas in a manner comparable to writing, as a form of self-expression it is invaluable. It does not have to be the best in every manner to be valuable. Expression should not be limited to narrative, regardless of narrative's

benefits. Just as variances exist in human nature, personality and behavior, so should they in our forms of expression and communication.

All these ideas do not detract from the practical outcome of this study. The real conclusion to this study comes with the release of a poster series that aims at raising awareness about rape on Union's campus, and the intersection of theorist with artist has served as an invaluable influence on the direction of the poster design. Learning from Hanna Arendt and Banksy the benefits of remaining anonymous as a creator, I've sought to create as gender neutral a design as possible. Knowing a female created the posters might attract different viewers more or less to the posters, and therefore the message. With my natural aesthetic being more feminine, I have needed to make a conscious effort to neutralize the gender of the imagery in the posters. Mainly this has been achieved through a monotone color palette and minimalist drawings. Given the different issues and biases on the matter, keeping my perspective as a female out of the design should help the message of the posters reach a wider audience, particularly in regards to males who view the posters.

After reading the arguments from Susan Sontag and Aaron Huey, I decided not to use photographs, but rather to use digitally altered, anonymous images to create the pictures used on the poster. By taking the images I originally considered using and instead using digital programs to reduce them to line drawings, I've achieved The aim of the posters is not to shock, or to blame or identify, but rather to provide a general education that people will incorporate into their views regarding sexual assault on campus.

Admittedly, Panagia and Bechdel had the smallest direct influence on the posters, but their ideas of questioning norms still relates. Though it does not affect the design of the posters, the entire idea behind the series is to show students how the reality of rape on campus varies from the conceptions of it they might have in their heads. While most people initially think of stranger rape, the poster aim and helping people understand the prevalence of acquaintance rape, and how that relates to Union College's sexual assault and harassment policies.

Finally, though Beauvoir does not fully embrace statistics, like Errazuriz did, the posters will include statistics. In this instance they will help achieve the greater benefit, as proposed by Beauvoir, of making people question their surroundings. Just as people lead their lives in ignorance of death, students continuously make decisions on campus without realizing the implications those have on sexual assault.

## APPENDIX

The following 6 pages provide 8.5 by 11 inch samples of the posters series created in conclusion to this paper.













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